On Writing Egypt from the Diaspora: An Interview with Adam Ashraf Elsayigh

Adam Ashraf Elsayigh

Sonali Pahwa: I proposed to interview you as part of this series to highlight the diasporic expansion of theatre about Egypt and by Egyptians since 2011. Unlike so many Egyptian artists who went into exile after the counter-revolution and return of military rule, I believe you have a longer diasporic history?

Adam Ashraf Elsayigh: Yes, I wanted to offer an initial disclaimer when you reached out to me about being part of an Egyptian playwright series because, as you know, I grew up in Dubai. Egypt is a host of contradictions to me. I moved to Dubai as a toddler really, and only came back to Egypt as a teenager, which happened to coincide with the most tumultuous years, 2011-2014. I always felt a dual identity as someone raised in a hyper-American milieu. My parents are very

Egyptian, and we spoke Arabic at home, but also when I moved to the US for graduate school, I realized I fit in here more than anywhere else I'd been before.

I contend with this duality when I write plays about Egypt. I've always had a Western influence and felt cognizant that I told stories of *my* version of Egypt, which is a fairly upper middle-class one. I don't think most Egyptians would see their version of their homeland reflected in it. For a long time, I felt a certain shame around that, but I've come to own it as a lens over time. This is my version of Egypt. However, the audience for my theatre is not primarily Egyptian.

SP: Many Egyptian friends of mine are now in diaspora and have different versions of Egypt based on when they left and under what circumstances. But they are still in community with other Egyptians, through social media, the written word, or performance. This is why I wonder if the Egyptian diaspora has become the key site of cultural production about Egypt.

Elsayigh: That makes sense to me. Still, when my New York dramaturg friend Salma Zohdi reached out about getting the rights to make a play about (imprisoned Egyptian revolutionary) Alaa Abdel Fattah my first impulse was to say no. I had been a 13-year-old in the Cairo suburbs, and I was not active in the protests in 2011. In fact, my form of rebellion was to tell my parents that I didn't care about politics even though we were living through a revolution. I thought I was not the person to tell Alaa's story. Salma was a bit older during the revolution and was very active in the streets, besides being friends with Alaa's family, and she had a different perspective. She said I could see what needed to be centered and explained for an American audience. "You

have an understanding of that world and can see it through a Western perspective," she said, "and that has value."

That conversation was a little over a year ago. In the meantime, we got the rights to work on *Alaa: A Family Trilogy* and began to develop its world. We did interviews with folks who were in Egypt during the revolution, some who were politically active and some who were not. Some are now in diaspora or spent time in prison. Having all these conversations and different levels of access, while thinking about my positionality with respect to the people I interviewed, has made it incredibly gratifying to write the story. Now I am more comfortable being part of an Egyptian playwright series than I would have been a year or two ago.

SP: That brings me to the question of how you use theatre as a means of place-making and spatial representation. Your first play, *Drowning in Cairo,* gave me such a vivid sense of Cairo when I knew it. I first went to live there months after the Queen Boat incident in 2001, around which this play is built. How do you construct worlds in your theatre?

Elsayigh: I had never really seen the kind of queer Egyptian world that *Drowning in Cairo* depicts. My parents would speak about social class and gender in very specific ways - their thoughts on this or that neighborhood, what we can say in front of people, what is *haram* or *'eib.* Being surrounded by that helped me depict homophobic society not as an obvious antagonist, but a nuanced world that fractures and triangulates with the queer world. The throuple at the play's center (Moody, Khalid, and Taha) themselves embody that triangulation. Each of them is a composite of types I knew, with social class being a key element of each type. Moody and

Khalid are upper class men, and Taha is the upwardly mobile son of a domestic worker, but also often their friend and lover. I've never seen an Egyptian play or television show that wasn't primarily melodrama, where people actually sound like they do in life.

In writing *Drowning,* I was interested in how naturalistic theatre could get at a deeper truth about class and gender in this society particularly with respect to the spaces we do not talk about. I think the play is also an attempt at an epic that wants to capture modern Egypt. But I don't think it quite lands on that front. Most of the theatre I create is a historical counter-narrative. I'm interested in people reading my plays and thinking, "I didn't know this lens or story existed" as opposed to the current state narrative which *hegemonically* wants to be the *only* one that gets to tell the story of modern Egypt.

SP: I have been to my share of Egyptian theatre, and you are right that social class is rarely staged in its natural complexity. Class conflict is often metaphorical and reconciled in a happy ending in plays. What do you think naturalistic theatre can show about social class that is so hard to talk about?

Elsayigh: When I first moved to the US, I was struck by how people do not talk about social class. Of course, that doesn't mean they aren't thinking about it, or that it doesn't exist. In cities like New York or San Francisco, you have public transit and literally rub shoulders with people, but otherwise I feel like it's easy to live in a bubble. Where I grew up in Dubai, class is racialized and that is a whole other thing.

But Cairo is not like that. Many middle- and upper-middle-class people live in buildings where someone living in the basement picks up their trash. You know their kids, or if there is a death in their family. I remember playing with our maid's kids on visits to Egypt every summer. Till, around when I was 7, my dad told us we shouldn't do that anymore. That class education probably happened more subtly or organically for kids who grew up in Cairo continuously, but it had to be explicitly coded for me as someone who was always somewhat on the outside. I always found it fascinating how these spaces blurred.

I don't know how to dramatize someone who is working class and remains within that identity in an Egyptian context, and I'd seen Egyptian soaps do it badly enough times that I knew I didn't want to do the same. That said, I did want to write about class, and how it intersects with queerness, in Egypt. As a teenager in Egypt, I befriended a number of gay men who'd grown up fairly working class and yet had ambitions of upward mobility (which was more possible in the past than now, both in Egypt and the US). I think that's not untethered from their queerness. And I was interested in that kind of character and how language is part of their class identity.

The reception to *Drowning in Cairo* in the US, particularly pertaining to this issue of class, has been somewhat preposterous. Audiences have asked me or talked about the character of Taha - the maid's son who becomes the two other men's friend and confidante - as if servants are entirely foreign to this culture. But middle-class Americans do have babysitters and other caretakers! And I do think this speaks to how Americans often create a layer of alienation between themselves and work depicting words outside the United States; even though I do

believe the worlds I depict are not indifferent from the worlds I inhabit here in the United States. I do think audiences who create that layer of alienation often miss the point.

SP: Indeed. Arab theatre in the US is so often predicated on national exchange – Algerian or Palestinian troupes performing at the Kennedy Center – that diasporic theatre can be difficult to categorize.

Elsayigh: There was a time I tried to mold myself into "an Arab artist" - just not one who lives there. That crystallized for me when I moved to New York as an international student and it became evident this place was home. I quickly started to feel the city was home after moving to New York as an international student, so I'm conscious of not having the same positionality as a visiting artist. But I also am not second-generation; I don't relate to Egyptian Americans. I have an immigrant sensibility; more likely to relate to a Peruvian who immigrated at the age of 18 than an Arab American born here.

SP: Diaspora really is its own cultural category. Are you familiar with earlier generations of diasporic Egyptians who wrote in English, like Ahdaf Soueif, or Waguih Ghali who wrote *Beer in the Snooker Club?*

Elsayigh: Ahdaf Soueif is actually one of the three protagonists of *Alaa: A Family Trilogy* [she is Alaa's aunt]. I don't know about Waguih Ghali.

SP: They headline a small but significant genre of Egyptian literature in English. English lets writers do certain things, and dramatic characters too. You have a scene in *Drowning in Cairo* where the three characters are in jail after a party on the Queen Boat is raided by police, and they speak in English because they don't want others to understand them. As someone who also grew up bilingual, I am curious about how English lets you and your characters navigate class lines.

Elsayigh: There have been many drafts of *Drowning in Cairo* with different proportions of Arabic and English. I wrote the first draft naturalistically - meaning as I think the scene would have actually happened - and it came out to 50-50 Arabic and English. To be clear, I write the Arabic in Franco-Arab script because I am an embarrassment!

Eventually, I wrote a 100% Arabic variant; and another that's 95% English for American audiences. But never a 100% one. There will never be a fully English one. I refuse. When it gets published, I think it will be the 95% English draft where you can comfortably dispense with supertitles and not be disrupted by the Arabic. You will follow the story and you'll be fine.

That was when I first moved here. I first wrote that 95% English draft *very* reluctantly because theatre institutions told me a play that's 30% in Arabic (or rather, *not in English)* wouldn't not have a life in the US. It infuriated me. German theatres program non-German language plays with subtitles all the time. But my opinions on dramatic language have dramatically changed over time. I'm more open to making things as easy as possible for American audiences; because they are primed to "other" people, to look for the things that separate them from the character. There's an impulse to dehumanize… and I try to not give it a chance in my work.

My upcoming trilogy about the family of political activist Alaa Abdel Fattah, for instance, is entirely in contemporary American English. I think it's essential because it's a political epic with so many layers of alienation already. We don't need language to be another layer.

SP: One reason I interpreted for the use of English in *Drowning in Cairo* was that it offers a language of queerness outside the derogatory terms for gay men in Egyptian Arabic. Your characters mention those terms but end up calling themselves gay or bisexual in English.

Elsayigh: The language of *Drowning in Cairo* is actually on the more family-friendly side for my plays. When you get to plays that have more intimacy or are more graphic, there are no words that don't feel derogatory for certain things in the Arabic language. Obviously that itself can be a source of drama; that question of *how* to create a localized vernacular in a queer community. And there's, of course, the critique that it gets Westernized and that that's a form of imperialism. But resisting can be hard when it's the default, or only, language you have.

SP: I feel like in theatre you can do a kind of partial translation, where your characters speak in mixed language and talk about navigating language while they are doing so themselves.

Elsayigh: I enjoy when there are no supertitles and audiences *accept* that certain things will just wash over them. It's incredibly liberating. Sometimes you are in a country where you don't speak the language, but you want to go to the theatre anyway. You know you are only going to get what you get. You figure some things out and get an experience that's unique to you.

SP: I wanted to talk about the dramatization of masculinity in *Drowning in Cairo.* You have some very interesting characters who struggle with the version of masculinity they have inherited, like the police general's son Khalid. He is gay and hates his father, but ends up as a police general too. What cinematic and theatrical canons do you draw upon when you write about masculinity?

Elsayigh: I never think about my gender performance today. But growing up in Egypt, the concept of masculinity was a *force* that was so constant and so explicit. Even in middle school, boys would talk about how to look and act; or conversations about posture and what posture is "concerning" (read: effeminate). I did grow up with an idea of masculinity as something you have to perform *correctly*. It really does feel like a form of drag, or a *very wild* bit that we've all just agreed to keep doing. The character Khalid (in *Drowning)* comes out of that.

There is a silly Egyptian soap opera *Al-Kabeer,* with Ahmed Mekki, that stages masculinity through twin boys who were separated at birth. One stayed with his father in an Egyptian village and the other grows up in the US with his American mother. I don't think it's what they *meant* to make, but it's a campy satire of a femme gay man and a hypermasculine one next to each other. Obviously, no one talks about it in those terms, but it is deeply about masculinity.

SP: So much canonical Egyptian drama is written by male playwrights who do not discuss masculinity explicitly in their work. I often found that women writers were more reflexive about gender performance.

Elsayigh: The obsession with masculinity is alive as ever. This is more performance studies than theatre, but the performance of masculinity is more *pronounced* than ever in today's Egypt, given the police, or rather, military state. I am in online groups where some days, the moderators will notify people to delete gay dating apps from their phone because police are stopping men downtown! I mean, they literally stop you, look at you and what you are wearing and decide on that basis to look through your phone!

SP: Can I now ask you about your script in progress about activist Alaa Abdel Fattah?

Elsayigh: *Alaa: A Family Trilogy* is still a first draft, but yes, of course. The trilogy was commissioned by Golden Thread Productions in San Francisco, which also did the world premiere of *Drowning in Cairo,* directed by Sahar Assaf. My friend who brilliantly dramaturged that production, Salma Zohdi, came to us with the idea, and the connection with Alaa's family. The play would not have happened without them.

It's a complex play: lots of interviews, hundreds of hours of writing. This piece combines me dramatizing an Egyptian political story with my practice in verbatim theatre and theatre of the real, which have always been passions of mine but distinct from playwriting. This play is documentary but not verbatim – I wanted the liberty of imagining scenes and mixing it with a memory play. These parts of my practice have been quite distinct, so I brought them together with some trepidation. But it's paid off. I think it's truly the closest I've ever come to the ethos I explicated earlier: theatre as counter-history.

Salma has been part of this journey and process from day one, building the story and conducting interviews. Working with her and Sahar has been a dream. People say American theatre is a playwright's theatre, but I do better in collaborative settings. I love co-writing things!

SP: What appealed to you about this idea for a play when Salma brought it to you?

Elsayigh: I think I have a complicated relationship to what it means to be political and Egyptian, and being political in relation to being Egyptian. My family was the type who were very much with the revolution when it was happening but went back to business as usual when it wasn't. I've always thought that there's a play there, and that I'd one day interview them about that moment of shift; how they went from being out in the streets every day to reverting to being pro-regime so suddenly. From a character perspective, it's wild to me.

I was writing *Drowning in Cairo* when the Mashrou' Leila concert happened in Cairo where Sara Hegazi held the rainbow flag and queer people were arrested. I thought it was absurd that my little student play written at NYU Abu Dhabi could get me into any kind of trouble, but somehow it became political. When I mentioned the play on my website six months after graduating college… I won't get into details but let's just say it caught the wrong eyes. *It turns out, one can be a national threat in a Bushwick sublet on a student visa…*

There has always been the question of where I get the authority to be political. I am told that I speak from privilege because I don't live in Egypt. "You're not here, why does any of this matter

to you?" Which is funny because when I am in Egypt, I'm told I can't talk openly there. Okay, then who can? It seems like the answer is no one, which is the point.

So when this play came to me, my first reaction was a sense of inadequacy. My first thought was that I am not the person to write it. All I knew about Alaa was that he is an activist who rose to prominence in the revolution and comes from a family of dissidents and is now imprisoned; and that his father (Ahmed Seif) was a lawyer for the Queen Boat accused.

As I delved deeper into Alaa's story, especially his hundred-day hunger strike, I just... struggled to think how to depict such an act... and the rationale behind it, in a context where it feels like all hope feels futile. The futility of fighting against what felt like an inevitable and discouraging system made me ask myself, why we are undertaking this endeavor in the first place?

SP: I guess because you have the space to do it? You might not feel a clear authority to tell the story, but you do have the space.

Elsayigh: But the question is: What does it mean to have hope when there's no reason to have hope? Why is anyone doing this when you're dealing with a military regime that won't respond to anything? The White House won't issue a statement either. But you still want to do something. Once I spoke to Alaa's family and heard their stories, I started to get the answer, and it became obvious that I had to write it.

SP: For many Egyptian friends of my generation, which is older than yours, Alaa has been an enduring symbol of political activism who represents a continuity to the struggle for rights. While others have been silenced and jailed, he has maintained a public voice even from prison.

Elsayigh: Yes, it is important to note that Alaa is not the only activist doing things – other people are active. But they are being actively silenced. So Alaa's existence is itself a counter-history.

When I first came to the play, I thought it would be a prison drama with him at the center. I was incredibly inspired by plays that came out of military resurgences in Argentina and South Africa, like the documentary theatre of Yael Farber. The first few interviews we did were with people who had been in prison with him or around the same time. Then I met Alaa's mother (Laila Soueif), his sister, Mona, and his aunt, Ahdaf Soueif, and decided the play was really about the legacy and lineage of that family. Because the answer to my question was there.

SP: How interesting that you have given the counter-history a differently gendered focus. Of course, this family has a well-known history of activism, but the women are not always at the center of its public historical narrative.

Elsayigh: One criticism (and self-criticism) I have had for a lot of my pieces is that they are often only about men. With this play, I was conscious I don't have a direct line to Alaa - I have never spoken to him and, unfortunately, don't know if I ever will. But I did hear and witness the stories and stories of these three women from his life.

Even though these women have been dissidents since the 1970s, and been incarcerated, the men get jailed for longer because of the public perception of men versus women's incarceration in a patriarchal society. Many of the crimes for which Alaa was sentenced were because he went to the street to take care of Mona, or Mona was hunger striking first. But the public narrative doesn't care. From the women in his family, there is also a sense that Alaa is experiencing things that they have not. The women may not be at the center of the public historical narrative but, in this case, they are very much at the heart of the counter-narrative.

The play's director, who is Peruvian, said that by virtue of them having this positionality, the women also have the onus of being generational storytellers who pass down memories. I get chills just thinking about some of the stories they have told me. Laila told me, for instance, that she and [Ahmed] Seif decided to conceive Mona when he was about to go to jail because they wanted to ensure the family line would be continued. That story is now at the start of the play.

SP: I am curious about how this play might fashion an audience of its own, which includes those of us who care deeply about Egypt but do not live there at present. I'm also interested in how Golden Thread Productions, the director, and you as the playwright, conceive of the potential audience of the play as not just diasporic but transnational.

Elsayigh: I think Alaa would hate to be spoken of as a phenomenon, but he *is* a transnational phenomenon. I was fascinated that during COP27 in Egypt last year, there was a campaign where celebrities like Emma Thompson and Mark Ruffalo read pieces of his writing from his 2021

anthology, *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated*. There are so many political prisoners under dictatorships across the world, and years ago, I did wonder about the extent of his reach.
I do feel in some ways both grateful for and humbled by my work being in proximity to, or a part of, that cause.

But it does say a lot about a story's singular power to create counter-history and for social change.

Salma, the dramaturg, came to Columbia to study theatre in 2013 after the coup. She said that all her friends who worked in the NGO field were worried that there would be no story of the 2011 revolution. Just a few months in, they were already forgetting what happened the previous month because there was a constant stream of new protests and new violations by the regime. Mona tweeted 150 times a day so there would be an archive to go back to, but now most people have deleted their tweets or made their Twitter accounts private out of fear. There is no public archive. In Egyptian schools, children are taught that the 2011 revolution was a success and brought Sisi to power. Counter-history sounds like a lofty idea, but history is literally being erased every day in Egypt. *Al-Ahram's* news articles about Alaa have been deleted from their archive, for instance.

There is a small international intelligentsia who know about Alaa and tweet #FreeAlaa whenever there is a UN summit. But I hope the average person will learn more about him as a result of this play, and there will be a broader base of people who bear witness to the life of his family. There are families like this in many parts of the world, so audiences may sense proximity and hear resonances with their own lives.

SP: I also hope the play enters curricula on transnational political theatre in the US. We teach plays by Griselda Gambaro and Yael Farber, but Egyptian drama is less well known.

Elsayigh: I do want the story to be as global as possible. The director is from Peru and knows what a military dictatorship is like. She can also relate to the story of criminal justice. *Alaa: A Family Trilogy* has an ensemble cast of 10. If it ends up being two Black people and a South Asian person and two Latino people, that's great. None of us is Alaa, but we are all performing on his behalf.

Sonali Pahwa
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From Sonali Pahwa: My ethnographic research on stage, street, and digital performance focuses on youth culture in the Arab world. My first book *Theatres of Citizenship: Aesthetics and Politics of Avant-Garde Performance in Egypt* (Northwestern University Press, 2020) examined the cultural politics of identity in Egyptian underground theatre, before and after 2011. A second project on digital performance began with articles on Egyptian bloggers who talked about self, sexuality, and revolutionary politics, a Saudi beauty YouTuber, and an Egyptian hijab influencer on Instagram. I studied the algorithmic, technological, and bodily strategies they used to assemble signature embodiments, developing a methodological toolkit for performance ethnography on digital platforms. My current research centers on digital entrepreneurs in Dubai - including those marketed as icons of modern Emirati identity and others who embody third-culture cosmopolitanism in an immigrant-majority nation.