

Jonathan suggested that we, Egyptians, give a quick analysis of the circumstances for theatre production and playwriting, (a little summary of the situation for playwrights and the wider theatre in Egypt) using a triangular framework of:

Artistic practice,

Higher Education and

Cultural Policy,

with a view to examining the possibility of a dialogue between artists, cultural operators, funders and politicians.

He optimistically wrote: 'maybe the landscape can be a little better negotiated in these changing and challenging times'.

He suggested some guiding questions, like:

What are the institutions which support new plays?

What is the relationship with Cultural Policy?

And are there particular Higher Education institutions that are useful?

What might be the opportunities and barriers to collaboration?

Background Information:

I. Higher Education Institutions

Let me begin with the Higher Education Institutions relevant to theatre practice:

1. A tradition of theatrical activities in government and private schools existed in Egypt from the late 19th Century up to the end of the 1960s when it rapidly declined, becoming almost non-existent except in some of the very expensive, private language schools.

2. At university level, all foreign language departments include courses in the drama of the respective language it teaches. These courses, however, approach drama as literature and rarely, if ever, pay any attention to the performative aspect of the texts or their

theatrical history. The same goes for the Diploma Programme in Drama and Criticism at Ein Shams University in Cairo. University theatre, however, is still very active despite its unwieldy bureaucratic apparatus, the strong presence of censorship in the choice of texts and their presentation and the strong opposition it has suffered since the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the 1970s. Inter-college and inter-university competitions are still held annually. Some of the performances in these competitions compare very favourably with professional ones, and some of our best directors, actors, playwrights, dramaturges and independent theatre troupes were apprenticed at university theatre. In a few cases, university performances take part in events mounted by the ministry of culture, or play at non-governmental venues. In these cases, however, the performance team present themselves as in independent troupe.

3. The only public Higher Education Institutions that offer specialized courses and professional training in theatre leading to a degree are:

- a. The Theatre Institute at the Academy of Arts in Cairo and its branch in Alexandria.**
- b. The Theatre Department at Hilwan University, Cairo.**
- c. The Theatre Department at the University of Alexandria.**
- d. The Theatre Department at the University of Menya, Upper Egypt.**
- e. The Department of Performing and Visual Arts at the American University in Cairo.**
- f. Departments of Drama and Theatre at some private universities that employ professional theatre practitioners and some of the staff of the Theatre Institute, but the standard of which I cannot judge.**

It is worth mentioning here that courses in playwriting are rarely offered in the above mentioned institutions.

4. Institutions, governmental, non-governmental, local and foreign where short workshops, or extended, non-degree training programmes are offered:

- a. Al-Hanager Cultural Centre of the Ministry of Culture up to 2009.**
- b. The Modern Dance School of the Opera House.**
- c. The Studio of the Creativity Centre in Cairo.**
- d. The Ministry of Culture's Creativity Centers in Alexandria and other key cities in Egypt.**
- e. The Bibliotheca Alexandrina (a state organization) through its annual Euro-Mediterranean Forum from 2003 to 2011.**

- f. El-Sawy Cultural Centre (an Egyptian NGO).
- g. Al-Mawred Al-Thaqafi (Cultural Resource) (a regional NGO).
- h. Studio Emad El-Din (a Euro-Egyptian NGO).
- i. The Townhouse and Darb Arts Centres.
- j. The Prohelvetia Foundation of Switzerland.
- k. The Goethe German Cultural Centre.
- l. The French Cultural Centre.
- m. The Flemish Institute of the Dutch Embassy.
- n. The Swedish Institute in Alexandria.
- o. Teatro Eskendria (an Egyptian NGO with European partners).
- p. The Jesuit Cultural Centre in Alexandria.
- q. The British Council in Egypt.
- r. The Arab Youth Theatre Fund (a Euro-regional NGO).
- s. Some private Actors Studios that mainly cater to the film industry.

Again, workshops or training in playwriting are rarely offered in the above mentioned venues.

II. Artistic practice

1. Governmental Institutions:

- a. The State Theatre Organisation with its 7 companies: The National, The Avant-garde, The Puppet, The Modern, The Youth, The Children's Theatre and Al-Ghad Experimental Company. Bureaucracy, small budgets, antiquated management, marketing and publicity policies and favouritism often mar the performance of these companies.
- b. The Cultural Palaces Organisation, with scores of cultural palaces, homes and clubs, as well as regional national companies all over Egypt. In the heyday of socialism in the 1960s, these regional centres served as incubators for new talent in writing, acting and directing. This role, however, has vastly deteriorated since the 1970s with the shift to conservative capitalism and religious fundamentalism.
- c. The Opera House, with its Opera, Ballet and Modern Dance Companies.
- d. The Ministry of Youth and Sports Youth Centres.

2. Non-Governmental Bodies and Venues:

- a. Private professional commercial companies.
- b. The Egyptian Society for Theatre Amateurs (ESTA).

- c. Independent Theatre Troupes working singly or gathered in coalitions.
- d. Rawabet, the Townhouse's Garage Theatre.
- e. Foreign Cultural Centres, which occasionally provide funding and/or performance spaces.
- f. The Catholic Cultural Centre in Cairo.
- g. The Jesuit Cultural Centre in Alexandria and Menya.
- h. The Coptic Church's theatrical troupes and festivals, like the Christian United Drama Teams and the Shobra El-Kheima's annual festival.

III. Cultural Policing

Under totalitarian, military regimes, cultural policy is invariably guided by the interests those in power.

In Egypt, cultural policy has undergone 3 fundamental shifts in the past 60 years:

1. **During Nasser's reign (1954-1970), its sole aim was to consolidate the new regime and use culture as propaganda.**
2. **When Sadat came to power in 1970, cultural policy took a sharp conservative turn in view of his crackdown on socialists and Marxists, his championing of religion and his support of the Islamists.**
3. **In Mubarak's reign (1981-2011) cultural policy was designed to whitewash the ugly reality of the regime and provide an attractive liberal, democratic façade.**

In all three cases, it was never intended to promote free creativity and freedom of expression, or seriously challenge the patriarchal heritage of the past and its antiquated values and worldview.