

**Nora Amin**

# The Eye of the Beholder

## IN MY COUNTRY

In Egypt, the history of women has always been related to struggle, and theatre - as well - was, and still is, related to struggle. These are two absolute facts, perhaps not only in Egypt, but everywhere. It is very easy, even natural, therefore, to link the three: women, theatre and struggle. I used to think that it must be a sad truth, that both women and theatre have to struggle to exist, but recently I realised that a life without struggle is not worth living. Therefore I reckon that the situation of Egyptian women making theatre is of great value, both for the history of women in our society and for theatre.

"Women in theatre" suggests a double struggle especially if you put that in the context of a culture which is neither comfortable with theatre and the performative arts, nor in harmony with the physically expressive arts in general. This impression increases when you consider the situation of women in both a social and religious way. It seems that, all over the world, women have suffered more or less the same oppression and repression from religion and tradition in general. Of course, women living in countries which adopt religious legislation or traditionally follow a strict moral and conventional code have to suffer and therefore struggle more. Egypt is obviously one of these countries.

For decades we have had a democratic system of government, a civil constitution beside the Islamic law (Shariaa'); we have adopted slogans like "the popularisation of culture" and "the democratisation of education"; and we have many NGOs<sup>1</sup> working in the field of human rights, women, culture and social development. Nevertheless Egyptian society is still left with traditions that cannot progress and

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1. Non Governmental Organisations and non profit organisations and associations working with and supporting women's productions in the theatre, and/or the use of theatre for developmental purposes, gender issues and social change (among other goals) include: The Women and Memory Forum, The New Woman Association, The Arab Woman Association, The Ford Foundation in Cairo, The Royal Netherlands Cultural Fund in Egypt, The British Council in Egypt and The Union of Women's Associations.

adapt to those slogans, which have more or less remained just slogans. In general, profound social attitudes have remained loyal to the inherited traditions of woman's role, code of conduct, public attitude and image. Such a value system needs a very long-term plan for change and profound and sincere attempts to alter the collective thinking in the infra-structure of society. All this, unfortunately, has not happened in Egypt. The first and clearest mirror of the lack of change is the situation of women.

It goes without saying that theatre reflects the culture it comes from or that it represents. Theatre is another expressive reflection of the value system that produced it, the imagination and creativity of the artists who realised it, and the politics and cultural attitudes of the audience that provides its context. As in most patriarchal societies and systems of absolute thought, the fear of democracy, freedom and equality of expression is very, very present in Egypt. All of which is represented by, and in, the theatre. Theatre becomes a threat to the dominant authority for many reasons: it gives voice to the oppressed and provides a necessary democratic expression of the opposite or alternative opinions; it provides equality within the community of spectators and performers; it creates a free space for encounter and collective statements; it allows the right for criticism and irony; it stimulates thinking, provokes change, it sometimes even asks for the physical participation of the audience; and it shows different aesthetics from those practised in everyday reality. In short, theatre points towards the existence of an "alternative" and the possibility of taking matters into one's own hands. That alone is a big danger to all authoritarian or dictatorial systems.

Another aspect of this subject exists on a more cultural than political level. Theatre is a performance space where physical and vocal

presence is a necessity - a beautiful necessity - which places the spectator before a mirror of her/himself. It is a creative mirror that amplifies the repressions of a physical existence, yet compensates with a dramatic/theatrical structure and aesthetics, which could work towards the liberation of the spectator's body or body consciousness. However, this process might very well fail, considering that the spectator can function as a "voyeur", judging what is shown, distancing her/himself from the stage. The spectator could possibly adopt an opposite attitude that negates that reality/performance, either in order to exercise a long oppressed power or to compensate for the lack of what she/he is missing in her/his physical existence, which is very present on stage.

Amongst all the possibilities for theatre to threaten the status-quo, theatre led or partly performed, written and directed by women, comes as an immediate one. Not only is it a situation where the voiceless will speak out their oppressions, opinions and desires, but they will speak so powerfully with their voices and bodies that they will represent the perfect image of opposition coming from the margins to the centre, taking matters into their own hands, taking control. In this context, women in Egyptian theatre have struggled from many perspectives: political, social, cultural and aesthetic.

## MALE AUDIENCE

Nine women on stage, unaccompanied by any male performers, is a scary sight for a male audience. I discovered this on March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2003, with the physical theatre and dance performance I had directed, that involved nine young women making their theatre debut. During the show I stood among the audience, most of whom were standing up, since the show took place in an unconventional space, somewhere between a construction and a demolition site. Everything was exposed since the stage was -

literally - a thirty centimetre mobile platform. There was a huge audience for a one night show, and the surprise was that the clear majority was male!

I was unfamiliar with the fact that wherever, whenever, there is a show with only female performers, in a society that still suffers from gender discrimination, there will be a huge male audience. Of course the audience seeks entertainment, especially with a title like "physical theatre and dance"! Anyway - to cut a long story short - what the steamy male audience got that evening was not at all what they had expected. *Nine* was very clearly, from the first moment of the show, about opposition, social criticism, female physicality, liberal thinking and the breaking of tradition. It was all very uncomfortable for an audience who expected docile young women in high heels, short skirts, heavy make-up and with a "please like me" look. There was nothing flattering, relaxing or entertaining for them.

I stood there, unnoticed, indirectly receiving the mostly unspoken reactions of young men who felt, wrongly, that the show was an attack on them. They perceived it as a clear political statement of female solidarity versus the society of men. They were offended. Their feeling grew as a kind of male solidarity in opposition to the so-called "feminist" performance. The tension grew, and it was all transmitted to and reflected on the stage, the poor naked stage. The nine performers carried on even more powerfully with their "struggle". The hidden dialogue between the stage and the audience was almost the most important part of that experience, which acquired an additional dimension to its discourse from that encounter with the audience.

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of one whole collective with the female audience, the men cut themselves off. Instead of understanding our intention that whatever opposition or rebellion the show represented was directed towards society as a whole and the system of traditional thinking, the men felt that it was directed towards them, and them only. In that sense, they had taken upon themselves the responsibility for all that was criticised in society; they unconsciously identified themselves as the "oppressors", and therefore felt very vulnerable when the women theoretically took over the power by going on stage.

Another aspect of this experience was the powerful physicality of the female performers. For once, they did not adhere to the codes of dance, or the ready-made vocabulary of choreography, but improvised authentically according to their physical memory and experiences. They went for the ultimate liberation of their individual female physicality through the performance of their personal identities vis-à-vis society, the status-quo and the future. My job was to collect all that material, choreograph it, and make a structure and collective discourse that reflected all the biographical input. This was the most difficult combination for an Egyptian male audience to digest: uncoded female physicality and autobiography. I had made a great mistake apparently!

Obviously this story says a lot about the situation of contemporary theatre in Egypt, the place of women in it, and their relationship with the audience. In a culture which supposes the female performer to be "a nice little girl" who wears fancy clothes, acts "virtuously", is obedient and docile, yet every now and then inspires some sort of seduction and flamboyant femininity (mostly played by belly dancers or actresses having the "character" of a belly dancer), it is very challenging to break the code and represent your individuality authentically and physically.

This is especially true if this identity is in such opposition to the mainstream thinking and theatre, and is not in any sense flattering or pleasing to the male audience. No hypocrisy involved. This is exactly when a reversal of codes takes place: the audience is no longer the judge of quality, and the show no longer aims to please, the show aims to change and to achieve that it has first to shock, or at least so it seems.

It is very interesting to analyse all the strategies and tactics which society, and women, have used in the theatre to keep everything "peaceful", to postpone any confrontation with the system. The images of women in Egyptian theatre through the 20<sup>th</sup> century range narrowly from the almost-saintly mother figure to the prostitute and/or belly dancer, or the virtuous young virgin (mostly the love interest of the hero). The latter is a female symbol of Egypt used in political theatre or folklore as a sort of traditional metaphor. The realities, whether everyday or profound, of the lives of Egyptian women, were very shyly spoken of in our theatre, depriving that art of so many strong stories and images, so much energy and presence.

In a society that thinks and sees through the mind and eyes of a man - because the value system has its source in the patriarchal world vision - there is no way to inject a different aesthetic - a female aesthetic - into art and theatre, unless women step in and make theatre themselves. Nobody can do it on their behalf, and that in itself is another struggle.

"A theatre director must be a man, a playwright must be a man, theatre is a man's job. It's not work for women. They can play roles designed for them, and almost never the lead role, because this has to be assumed by a man. The hero of the show, the audience's hero can only be a man." This is the kind of statement a woman has to deal with

in the common theatre community in Egypt. Woman has to create her chance, establish her place/space and nobody will help. If she doesn't, those in charge will make obstacles of different types, including insisting on restricting her to mainstream roles to mould her into one of the given stereotypes; or accusing (!) her of being feminist, of making feminist theatre. This kind of statement immediately becomes an indirect accusation in our society, despite the humour that accompanies it most of the time. A feminist female artist is regarded as suffering from a psychological disorder; wanting to become like a man or to take his place; refusing her femininity (where femininity means inferiority or submission); hating men; liking women more than she should (!). In short, being called "feminist" does not make you popular at all unless you are a man.

### **THE ORIENTAL DANCER DREAM**

Another example of the borders that have to be respected by female performers has to do with middle-class culture. In this dominant culture, it is unacceptable for a serious actress to break with traditional social codes and perform oriental dance, or shift from one culture to the other throughout a show. I was in this situation when I presented 3, an interactive solo performance that I directed and performed at the Library in Alexandria in December 2002.

The performance was based on my old dream of becoming an oriental dancer, how that dream started when I was a child and developed in my teenage years, only to fade under the power of the social inhibitions attached to such an image. This led to an attitude of self-repression that I call "I am not a woman". In the performance I tried to make the connection between this self-repressive attitude and the denial of my femininity. Oriental dance represents femininity for me. The show consisted of three

scenes, which included instant video filming of the work while I was performing which was then projected on the ceiling in close-up shots. This represented the "look of the other", of society and its continuous monitoring of female behaviour.

In the first scene, I walk on to the stage from the audience, wearing high heels and a short dress. I take the dress and shoes off violently and throw them at the audience immediately after three long minutes of watching them watch me seated on a single chair in the middle of the stage, and seeing how they struggle with me looking at them. The second scene consisted of another confrontational struggle with the cameraman who was then on stage filming me. Taking the dress off on stage and putting on a pair of trousers and men's shoes expressed the duality that I confronted with the attitude of "I am not a woman". The last scene featured my actual attempt to dress in a red and silver oriental dance costume whilst lying down on the stage as if dreaming, but also dancing in that horizontal position. The camera was still filming from above.

The middle-class male audience had a very different interpretation of my show. I will list the following misinterpretations.

1. The video work was there to emphasise the parts of my body that were not very visible from afar in the theatre, therefore to provide a better vision for the spectators. I saw this as proof of male voyeurism. For me it meant that they had the usual male gaze that devours the female without taking on board the theatrical context of the activity that I was engaged in. They only saw a female body. Thus the artistic/aesthetic element was deprived of its function, the screen images did not convey the intended metaphor and the spectators were so much "into" the performance that they did not really see it.

2. For me the short dress and high heels



Nora Amin in audio-video installation *Space Within*. Photo: Meg Kowalski

represented the look of a smart and composed woman, who might be going to a posh party, but for the men in the audience they represented the costume of seduction. There was a clear contradiction in our cultural reference to dress codes.

3. The line "I have always dreamt of becoming an oriental dancer" came as a shock to everybody, particularly because the Arab word for an oriental dancer is almost synonymous socially with "whore", at least in the collective understanding and imagination of the male and female population of Egypt. It was a paradox for a serious writer and theatre maker to say such a thing. It was almost suicidal!

4. Between the scenes, short texts of poetry that I had written were projected on the ceiling. The texts were addressed to the audience to read. There was a message in them. Unfortunately the audience was so busy looking at me changing my clothes on stage that they missed out on most of the texts. The irony is that one of those texts

said: "Do not look at me, take your eyes off me". It was exactly what they should have done if they had not already been looking at me so intently. Though if they had read the texts it would have meant that their eyes were not on me anyway, and so the texts would not have been describing their situation.

With all these misunderstandings, I was even more surprised by my own poor understanding when, during the dress rehearsal, I found about thirty female teenagers, between sixteen and eighteen years old, all veiled, pressing their noses to the glass wall on the right side of the stage, smiling and applauding. They were blowing me kisses when I was lying on the stage in my dance costume, in the most sensual situation of all! Those young women liked me, they liked my courage, my physicality, and they wanted to be like me. That was a truly new discovery for me. There is always an unexpected reaction from the audience in performances of this kind, and these teach me something on my journey, something about how to push at limitations and test existing borders.

### **WOMEN AND INDEPENDENT THEATRE**

During the sixty years of Egyptian theatre history, we've heard of only one female director, Naima Wasfi; perhaps there were two or three more, but Naima was the only one of whom we knew - strange! This didn't change until the 90s when we witnessed the strong birth and development of the independent theatre groups, an alternative theatre scene and community. These groups presented experimental works, new aesthetics, vital and violent social criticism, and above all the liberal world vision that had been adopted by the young Egyptian generation of that time.

Now, after almost thirteen years, the independent theatre groups have provided the Egyptian art scene with almost ten

female theatre directors who couldn't have flourished and developed without being part of a progressive movement like this. The independent theatre movement gave them the space and context necessary to exist, and an alternative community to the more conventional and bureaucratic theatre community supported by the ministry of culture, since the government's theatre, or the public sector theatre would never have supported their work. It also gave them a context beyond gender and gender discourse. The best space/place for new art, new visions, is usually the border, the in-between, the cross-roads.

In Egypt, the independent theatre has always stayed in those places. Unrecognised by the government until very recently, it looked like an illegitimate child, not belonging to institutionalised art, or to the commercial, or private sector of theatre, except that it had strong links with theatre abroad and the support of the foreign cultural centres in Cairo. A context like this is necessary to empower women in theatre because the struggle becomes collective, becomes bigger and more obstinate.

Egyptian women in the avant-garde theatre, the independent theatre scene or the alternative theatre, have been struggling in collaboration with their colleagues and partners to implement a notion of a cultural theatre. They realised in time that it is both in the interest of their work and of the independent theatre movement to stay united. Despite the temptation to disassociate this from that, to talk about a feminist theatre in Egypt, the work of the female theatre directors stayed an integral part of one big movement for change. It was also very clear that these women's vision and innovative approach would add much to the movement, enriching it with better artistic and social dimensions, at the same time attracting new audiences, opening doors

which were closed and revealing stories which were hidden.

Looking back now, I am even more convinced that the struggle of women to become part of the forces producing theatre, is actually representative of many other social forces that have engaged in similar struggles, having been for so long deprived of that right. Women's issues join the same stream as the issues of all oppressed people, marginalised classes or repressed categories. The aesthetics are different, the stories perhaps, but the essence of the struggle is more or less the same. This is how I would prefer to look at theatre made by women, whether in Egypt or anywhere else in the world. This view saves it from becoming an elitist activity, a sheltered voice or a "tourist site", from becoming the opposite of what it is struggling to achieve.

It was a very natural step for female directors like Effat Yehia, Abeer Ali, Karima Mansour and myself, to form our own independent theatre groups. Joining in the bigger community of independent theatre was almost like illegitimate children coming together to make one big gang! It was inevitable for us to go in that direction, since public theatre would not recognise us and the commercial theatre does not recognise anything other than material profit anyway. If you want to make theatre, you must establish your own group and create your own chances. You must become the artistic manager, the distributor, the producer, the director, the administrator, etc. In a nutshell, you must work as an arts manager, especially to locate a space for rehearsals and performance, and to fund-raise for the show, before you can start enjoying the luxury of directing a play. That was - and still is - the case for a female director in Egypt, and is almost the same for all independent theatre directors. Nobody will do it for you, nobody will speak on your behalf, you have to assume your role

even under the worst conditions.

With our own small theatre companies to run, performances to direct and chances to create, these women and I gradually started attracting an audience that included university students, professors, intellectuals, journalists, media, NGOs, activists, artists, middle class families and housewives! These female artists did not want their audiences to relax and applaud as usual at the end of the performance. Instead they wanted to involve them in the issues presented in the show, they wanted to provoke change, make new friends and strong allies - but it was not that easy after all.

Audiences usually come to theatre with their own expectations, clichés, stereotypes and ready-made judgements. In societies lacking democracy and practical on-going dialogue between different ways of thinking, the different groups of citizens see each other in terms of images - inherited, fake or true, but images nevertheless - because they are without a true connection to the actual people on whom these images are projected. These images are complex because audiences inevitably define, identify or position themselves in relation to them. The images also, almost inevitably, carry the audience members' own projections of how they see themselves and the "other". This operation involves all kinds of compensatory acts and role reversals.

When the theatre space represents women, it becomes a kind of open space for debate and a cross-roads for all of the above. Theatre has the privilege and responsibility of conducting and hosting a true and profound dialogue between the elements of the society, between the audience and the stage on the one hand and between the audience and the stage together and the society outside. Through the medium of theatre, stereotypes can be broken, strict hierarchical positions changed, visions

exchanged and truth revealed.

In the case of women, theatre allows them the opportunity to speak on their own, to engage themselves creatively with the audience in questioning female/male relations, the traditional role of women, social inhibitions, taboos and discrimination between genders. Above all, theatre can give women a space to express how they want to be seen in theatre. It offers a chance to change the usual image of actresses and dancers, and the exploitative perspective attached to female physicality on stage. It offers a chance to change the traditional point of view that female exposure in theatre is equivalent to a kind of prostitution; that the act of offering one's presence to be looked at, presumably with freedom and pleasure, implies indirectly the hidden possibility of making a trade with that body. In this sense, the female performer becomes an object of consumption, and this metaphoric and literal situation deprives her of many human rights. She loses her individuality and becomes classified in the wider category of her type. She loses her intellectual and creative identity and is reduced to a body which is in turn reduced to a sexual object, modified further to the usual, conventional male vision of female sexuality in given time and space.

Women's theatre in Egypt is a way out of this very complicated situation. It is a chance to re-explore identities, to re-integrate women as human beings in the community of citizens with equal rights. Hence it serves to reunite the forces of society, break down the imposed borders and re-vitalise the presence and role of women in a society where this is desperately needed.

### **THE FEMALE AUDIENCE**

In addition to the evident social and developmental roles that it can and should play, women's theatre in Egypt involves another

specific struggle, additional to the political and economic battles that it shares with other independent groups and, to a different degree, with Egyptian theatre in general. This is a struggle to prove in the first place that women can make theatre, that they can be responsible for work, a theatre group and male artists in those groups. It is a struggle to prove that a woman is a working and productive force, not a Barbie doll or a puppet, a child or a pretty face. It is a struggle to win social recognition for the fact that women have grown out of the long centuries of childhood that gave the patriarchal system more power and validity, and led to a violent separation between women as creative minds and women as bodies.

This struggle is very specific to women's theatre, no other kind of theatre witnesses it. It is an ironic struggle with more unnecessary chains to break, more false obstacles to overcome. Winning this elementary struggle would open the doors to carry on with the next battles on the list. If women remain deprived of the right to be as wise, responsible, productive and positively active as men, the theatre they make will be perceived always as a "funny thing", a "freak show", or a childish attempt that calls for the applause of kind parents.

It goes without saying that it is of vital importance to create a female audience that understands this situation, shares the struggle and is capable of extending itself from the theatre space to the society outside. I believe that the dialogue and complicity with the female audience is a very crucial pillar of women's theatre. We must not neglect the fact that most women are still unaware of their oppression, or, in some cases, refuse to put that awareness into practice. Women are frequently intimidated by conventional social discourse, feeling that their personal issues are not shared, that their struggles are not important enough to



bring to the public, that these kinds of struggles belong more to the political arena. In this sense, women create additional myths to stand between them and the possibility of solidarity with other women. They consolidate the barriers, strengthen the inhibitions, and therefore require women's theatre to work harder to get through to them and involve them.

If we succeed in that communication, a large part of the audience will become active in the theatre space; a more productive dialogue will take place between the women on stage and those among the audience. At the same time, a more equal relationship will be established between the female and male audience members. All of which ought to lead to accumulative and continuous re-positioning and democratisation.

### CRITICS

In Egypt until now mainstream theatre and art, as well as the cinema industry, television, pop songs and music, still conserve and exploit the image and role of women as sex objects, while, at the same time, publicly adopting a moralistic and traditional discourse. This has always been a clever game to play in commercial art, which forms the majority of the mainstream: to ally with traditional morality and religious judgement, while presenting all the entertainment that colludes with exploitation. It is a winning tactic to flatter common social and cultural discourse, while adhering to the rules of the commercial market. As a result everybody is happy. The male audience gets its proper dose of pleasure, whilst keeping as its protection the mask of false morals and judgmental attitudes. Here again, women's theatre is in danger of being taken under the umbrella of mainstream, or even government, theatre, just to be used as a new attraction, a kind of "see what women are doing!" - yet again a kind of tourist site.

But women's theatre is struggling against all of that. It refuses to play the game of the commercial mainstream, to flatter the audience, to use what is female as a means of attraction and to join in the market rules of exploitation. Instead it aims for cultural output instead of box-office hits; it votes for change and development instead of material profit - all of which makes the situation more complicated. Women's theatre becomes like an acrobat walking, or even dancing, on a very thin rope, whilst underneath there are crocodiles with their mouths wide open, their teeth newly sharpened!

It is very difficult for Egyptian audiences to watch women speak on stage about their long hidden oppressions; occasionally for some it is even shocking or insulting. It becomes even more difficult if you deal with an intimate subject and if you are using a physical approach or theatre style. It is uncomfortable to witness female physicality on stage which does not adhere to one of the common codes for female presence given by society and mainstream art; to see women being present in freedom and without being stereotypical or apologetic. It is a real challenge, not only for the artist, but especially for the spectator, whether male or female.

For the male it defies and overcomes his so-called power and calls for duality. For the female it represents a painful resurrection of what she could have been, or whom she might become. A female spectator would go through a profound questioning of her own physicality and female identity vis-à-vis the female performer. Freedom on stage calls for freedom in reality; an autonomous female presence in theatre stimulates the autonomy of the female citizen in society. Finally, the female spectator will be found at the crossroads of a true existentialist experience - perhaps the male spectator too, but certainly to a different degree. It may be that this experience of confrontation and change is

universal and specific to theatre.

The struggle of women in Egyptian theatre finds allies and support from the community of female critics, who have played a vital role in solidarity with the independent theatre in general, including women's theatre, in supporting all the attempts at innovation and the expression of the unspoken. Critics such as Nehad Selaiha, Menha Al Batraovi, Maysa Zaky, Aabla El Reweiny, Farida Al Naqqash have contributed a strong theoretical basis to the new Egyptian theatre. It is certainly not to be ignored that their work is an integral part of the role of creative women in Egyptian theatre. Even though, with one exception, they are not performers or directors, they are a very creative force in the contemporary Egyptian theatre scene, and an especially positive energy for the independent theatre groups.

The struggle of independent theatre in Egypt to find recognition and to induce change in all aspects, has been mirrored in the struggle of women's theatre. No doubt this is because both belong to almost the same kind of thinking that empowers independence, freedom, individuality, development, opposition, criticism and self-criticism. By definition this way of thinking is against oppression, repression, taboos, discrimination, hierarchy, absolute value systems, separation and moral judgement. In this sense all independent theatre is political, all women's theatre too. Independent theatre must give space to female voices and creativity and female theatre must practice its responsibility and belong to that wider context.

I believe that all theatre aiming for freedom, aims for freedom for all people, otherwise it would not be true or sincere. The goal of freedom does not discriminate or else it becomes a reversal of freedom, a freedom conditioned by its opposite, by a chain, an unfree freedom. Therefore,

women's theatre aims for the freedom of the entire audience, whether male or female. The freedom of women can only come hand in hand with the freedom of men - both would be free from an unfair system of society and thought, both would enjoy the fruits of this freedom, a healthier relationship, a more harmonious and productive society. After all why would men or women, or the two together, create oppressive systems for each other, unless they were already somehow, oppressed? Perhaps oppressed by fear, by some inner myth or even by themselves?

Theatre can act as a true and free medium of re-integration, of inclusion, sharing and participation. It is a space where everybody can exist, look in the mirror, re-create identity, communicate, change or exchange mirrors. All of which can only be achieved by struggle, but what else is theatre if not a creative place to struggle and to enjoy that struggle.

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