

Notes

- 1 Yari, Manoochehr, "The Original and the Fake in Traditional Theatre", *The Book of 5th Traditional-Ritualistic Festival*. Tehran: Namayesh Publications, 1993. pp. 15-16.
- 2 Nassirian, Ali, 'What Is Takht-e Hozi', *Theatre Quarterly*, no. 13, Namayesh Publications, spring 1991, p. 95.
- 3 ibid.
- 4 Beizayi, Bahram. *Theatre in Iran*. Tehran: Kavian Publications, 1965. pp. 169-170.
- 5 Kasbian, Hossein. "Siyah Bazi Is the Heritage of Fools", in a collection of interviews: *The Book of the Sixth Festival of Traditional-Ritualistic Theatre*. Tehrna: Namayesh Publications, Oct. 1994. pp. 54-55.
- 6 Forough, Mahdi. "Theatre in Iran". In *The Book of Iran Shahr*. Tehran: University Publications, 1963, p. 914.
- 7 Beizayi, Bahram. *Theatre in Iran*. Tehran. pp. 169-170. Also see *The Origins of Theatre in Iran* by Abolghasem Jannati Atayi. Tehran: Safalishah Press, 1977.
- 8 Shahriari, Khosro. *The Book of Theatre*, vol. 1. Tehran: Amir Kabir Publications, 1986. p. 80.

THE GENESIS OF COMEDY AND THE COMIC CONDITIONS IN SUDANESE THEATRE

A short history

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The history of modern Arabic theatre shows that there are close connections between theatre-forms in East and West. It is clear that when we look at the comic condition and cultural varieties in Arabic and Western theatre, we study in fact the Arabic comic theatre and the impact of Western theatre on it. Out of this connection a number of questions arise. This paper handles Sudanese comic theatre as a case study because it represents Arabic comic theatre with all its inconsistencies. Does this theatre represent the comic condition? Does it argue with social issues? Does it reflect issues with the help of comical techniques within a cultural, social and political context? All these questions lead us to a confrontation with the crisis in Arabic comic theatre resulting from socio-cultural changes in our countries during the last decades. The Arab dialogue with Western culture in general and theatre in particular, depends on the coercion of theatre in its Western version of all the different theatrical means of expression. This has proven to be the case with leading group of playwrights in Sudan.

For my argument, the paper proposes to investigate the genesis of comedy, the sources of laughing, its purpose, and the general principles that form the comic condition of the play, all leading to diversity and difference between Arabic and Western performance. I will conclude with an historical overview of the development of comic texts and characters in Sudan.

The genesis of comedy

I will not deal with the origin of the word comedy. It seems more adequate to describe the laboratory in which the comic situation is formulated: its verbal expression and acting strategies, the situation that creates misunderstanding and paradox and triggers the chemical process, which produces the laughter. But where does this process begin? Does it start in the mind of the receiver or with the playwright? Does it come out of the actors mind and the body and bursts out into theatrical signs as gestures, facial expressions, sounds etc.? What is

important is that comedy is borne out of a process of rotation, of alternation. Before there is laughing there is expectation and a beginning of understanding on the audience side about the implications and the assumed end, as a part of a shared intellectual process that reaches further than the theatrical place and time. Let us suppose that on stage a burglar strikes into a room of a small-time thief, who keeps his treasury keys inside his sock, touching this leg with every move he makes while sleeping. Noticing this, the burglar puts a sock on an artificial leg and gives this leg to the sleeping man. Then he takes the keys.

If this story can be taken as an example for a comic situation, the scene will stimulate the experience of comicality in the mind of the audience. Assuming the stinginess of the man and his fear of loosing his money they will study his reactions:

- a. Does he consider the artificial leg as his real leg?
- b. Does he cry for loosing his leg or look for the key first?
- c. Is he in total distress?

What are the sources of comedy? Is it the stereotype, the character, the situation, the expression or the expectations of comic behavior? Could one say that the source of comedy is a ritual, performed collectively at specific moments? Could one compare the communication pattern with the picture of a triangle whose tip is pointed to the stage, whereas the baseline widens in the auditorium while the two main sides represent approaches and diverge the angles of the triangle's base? This alternation of the movement of the sides towards the tip creates the source of the comical movement, starting sometimes from the audience, sometimes from the stage.

Purpose of comedy

The purpose of comedy is always governed by culture leading the communication- process. Indeed, to answer the question why man laughs, one has to specify as well what the purpose of comedy is. And then, when laughing and fun were born from religious festivals, its correlation with the rousing of religious and magical functions, made the phenomenon of laughing a form of social ritual. This collective background stimulates a weeping man, when put into a group of laughers, to laugh also. Though the purpose of laughing seems clear, it is always connected with astonishment. In my opinion there is no laughing without astonishment as a cause or purpose (with the exception maybe in the case of hysteria where it should get an psychological explanation).

Laughing is a notion prior to social conduct or instinctive behavior; it is first of all an emotional condition in a negative or positive sense. Preparing for the comical moment, we can investigate this condition in its cultural variety as an effect of the conscious understanding and unconscious memory, which trigger a laugh. And it is an effect of time. The celebrated comedies of Aristophanes that released storms of laughter out of his images in language in their own time, have become history in Athens today. Culture has been moving onwards and developed different patterns.

In the communication between audience and stage, what governs the collective mind and the consciousness are the signs that embody ethical values, which enable these signs to be firmly established, fixed and potentially indicative of the alteration between the interpretation of the text by the audience both on the level of the written text and the text in performance. In general this indicates that there are no specific cultural conditions to the comical situation. But of course in order to perceive a Western comedy for an Arab audience (and vice versa) preparation data should be offered. These data exist in cultural constituents, which can be mastered by the historical and local context of the audience. Imagine putting a traffic light in the desert. No Bedouin would stop for it because they do not know the conditions of roads, cars, city life etc..

The comic condition and Sudanese theatre

To understand the comic condition and its relation to the cultural context we have to discuss methods, style and the way laughing is prepared in the Sudanese theatre. The main trend in our comic theatre is a situation-comedy that is based on stereotyping and a context where the situation and the verbal expression appear to stand in a paradoxical situation with each other. The paradox lays in the phenomenon of comic theatre as a monologue, a solo art form presented by one actor/character in a suitable dressing up. These monologues were usually presented at the occasion of a wedding party inside the house.

This situation lasted until these monologues were offered in the interval between the acts of a play that was performed. One year after the other these monologues were performed and used to tackle social issues such as drinking alcohol or gambling. Only later the monologues developed in sketches of simple nature, that criticized one special topic and depended on stereotyping. These sketches paved the way for longer comedy plays, representing the stereotype of the simple and naive man of the rural areas who is not familiar with the complicated relations within city-life and is shocked by people's behavior. The

plays develop the theme of the distance between the retarded and underdeveloped rural areas and the developed life in the city. It is a cultural gap which generates uncoupled stereo/types and motivate laughter.

It seems that at this time the Sudanese theatre-makers are in need to absorb the socio-cultural dimensions of comedy inside the Sudanese cultural belt and start to distinguish the modern varieties in the existing comic experiments. The important questions of course are the following: Do they see these varieties as autonomous or integrated? Do they concentrate on specific groups inside the Arabic/Sudanese cultural space or do they reach out for global inspiration. Is there, in short, any need for cross-cultural comedy through which one could criticize the coercive version of theatre from two viewpoints: the "interior credibility" and the "exterior credibility". By the first term we mean the credibility of perception and methods of the theatre inside the Arabic/Sudanese socio-cultural belt, that produced it, whereas by the second one we speak about the credibility of theatre/comedy brought from the Western socio-cultural context and implemented in the other social-cultural domain as happened in Sudan.

Origins of the comic

Sudanese theatre critics dispute the question of origins of its comic traditions. Some say that comic theatre was in Sudan from ancient times, as one can see in the paintings on old temple walls.¹ Some believe that it is an imported drama-genre, which came to Sudan from Egypt more recently, when the Egyptian comedian Bulbul visited the country to present his monologues. Others think that this form of theatre was influenced by the plays performed at the foreign community clubs during the period of colonization by the English (1905-1919).² After this period we see the rise of Sudanese comic theatre where traditional folkloric poems are used as texts like *Ikhwaniyat* (Brotherhood).³ The subject matter of these poems is the relationship between the poet and his colleagues or sometimes a situation that has happened to one of the poet's relatives. For instance, the poet depicts one of his relatives running after the cat, which steals meat and milk everyday:

"Why cat, do you steal night and day,
Are birds and mice too expensive for you?
Look, Medina is setting a trap for you
She swears on the grave of her grandfather
To pull your claws out

And she swears to Mr. Al Jack too
She will throw you away in a sack
So, when you go in and out of Medina's house, beware
She has killed a lot of cats before".

History

Historical investigations have shown that there is a lot of comicality in Sudanese heritage before Colonialism. These forms however never reached maturity on stage except in modern times. In particular in the 1930s and 40s they were presented as interludes, having been theatricalized by pioneers of Sudanese theatre. As a whole theatre in Sudan emerged in 1909 with the first play text *Al Murshed Al Sudany* (The Sudanese Guidance) written by the governor of Al Getina province by Abed Al Gader Mukhtar, an Egyptian officer. The theme of this play dealt with encouraging people for education. It depicts two boys, one well-educated and speaking classic Arabic, the other illiterate and speaking slang, spelling badly and disrespecting his family. Yet, in a way, an idea of this theatre had been already introduced into Sudan by the Egyptian influence during the time of the Anglo-Egyptian occupation in 1898. From that date onwards many Arab and European companies visited Sudan and performed plays either in English or Arabic. In 1910 the Sudanese education-mission to Egypt helped to create the formation of a group of people, capable of understanding and practicing the function and techniques of the theatre arts. This interaction between Sudan and Egypt in the educational missions enabled Sudanese students to study not only literature and religion but also to become acquainted with Egyptian theatre. This led Sudanese theatre pioneer Khalid Abu Alruth to the statement that his play was written according to the methods of Ahmed Shawgi. This same Abu Alruth wrote the first Sudanese version of an Egyptian comic monologue. The writer studied religion studies in Omdurman/Khartoum but was expelled from his studies because he asked a man to play the role of a woman. But women were not allowed to join theatre groups or even appear on stage.

Crucial in the development of Sudanese theatre was the Institute of Bakatt AlRuda, established in 1943 for the training of teachers. Not only did it perform Shakespeare and Shawgi in Sudanese language, it also sent Sudanese to England to study theatre in the 1950s and 60s. They came back to lead theatre activities and to train teachers to organize theatre activities in schools. Comedies of Shakespeare (*Midsummernightsdream*) and Molière (*Tartuffe*) were translated and performed.

In that same period a very famous comic actor, director and playwright emerged, Al Fadil Saeed, who began to perform the monologues of Abu Elruth, but quickly developed more elaborate sketches at the end of the 1950s. This marked a turning point in the history of comic theatre in Sudan. Fadil Saeed asserted that these comic performances were unique, maybe even more convincing than the former comic interludes, and pleaded for comic theatre as a structural part of Sudanese arts. His opinion was strongly presented during his touring in the country. The well-composed sketches he performed played an important role in the developing comic theatre, although the sketches were about character-stereotypes rather than social issues. His success was due to the charming style of his acting, presenting some of the most famous characters *Kartooob* and *Bitgudaim* in Sudan. Many pioneers followed him like Osman Ahmed Hamid with *Tor Aljar* and Mahmoud Sirag with *Abu Dal' aiba*. They took their models from everyday practice. Fadil Saeed's influence both in acting, directing and playwriting was very strong on a new generation of comedy-groups whose members studied at the Institute of Music and Drama in Khartoum. At this moment however the character-stereotypes are discouraged. The Institute tries to establish new forms of comic theatre based on social issues.

Comedy theatre in Sudan has more profited from Arabic comic drama such as the writings of Almagott, Faroug Korshid and Mahfouz Abdelraman etc. than from Sudanese playwriting. As a consequence, present comic plays are not about specific Sudanese issues although both the texts and the typical characters are adapted like *Almuharig* the clown (Almagott) and *Habazlam Bazaza* (Abdelraman). These adaptations were made during recent graduation projects of the directors-course of the Institute of Music and Theatre and later transferred to public performances. It becomes clear that influences from Arabic theatre in general and Egyptian theatre in particular has been very strong and that the tradition of Fadil Saeed's stereotyping is still very much alive.

Notes

- ¹ Shams El Din Younis, *Sudanese Rituals throughout History*, Arabic text, Khartoum, Sudan, 2004.
- ² Osman El Nasari, *Foreign Community Theatre 1905-1919*, Arabic text, Khartoum, Sudan, 1979.
- ³ Al Hamid Mohammed, *Sudanese Comic Poetry*, Arabic text, Khartoum, Sudan, 1999.

TRADITIONAL WESTERN INTERPRETATIONS OF THE COMIC HERO VS. THE LACANIAN CHALLENGE The Case of *Amphitruo*

Freddy DECREUS

Amphitruo, deluded hero and cheated husband, great Theban warrior and king, has figured as the victim of randy and almighty Jupiter in a long series of Western comedies. In the hands of Plautus, the greatest comedy writer of Roman Republican times, this poor king was manipulated by the father of the gods himself, so that Jupiter could assume the complete identity of Amphitruo and seduce his wife, the decent Roman *domina* Alcumena. The father of the gods temporarily but totally deprived him of his human appearance, and in pursuance of his love-making, stretched the length of the night into three (the *nox longa-motive*). When the real Amphitruo arrived the next morning and wanted to tell his wife of his military successes, he could not understand why her reception was so cool and why she already seemed to know what had happened on the battlefield. On top of that, Amphitruo's slave, Sosia, was reduplicated by Mercurius, a situation which resulted in the farcical scene of two couples facing each other, a human general and his slave, and a divine 'copy-paste version' of Jupiter and Mercurius. The story ended in an even more incredible way, with the double accouchement by Alcumena, a double birth which revealed that Jupiter was the father of Heracles, and Amphitruo the father of Iphicles. And do not precisely the adventures of Heracles, prototype of the fallible hero, and son of an ever amorous father, illustrate, *ad nauseam*, the painful limitation of the human race that never can cope with its lustful nature?

Reading a story like this, one must admit that its topics really are something special, outstanding in fact. Let us focus just on three themes, all of which illustrate primal human problems and which keep on returning in later Western interpretations. First, there is the god/men relationship in Jupiter's descent from heaven and his amazing experiences in a human world, an elaboration of the sacred marriage between heaven and earth. Secondly, there is a man's anxiety about his wife and his inability to understand her as the radically other, she who is able to bear children and who succeeds in puzzling him so profoundly. And finally, this 'comedy' continually asks questions about doubles: two gods (Jupiter; Mercurius) doubling two humans (Amphitruo; Sosia), two fathers