

### A new model?

At last they come to the final position of Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. Faced with a godless, meaningless, and pain-filled universe, they decide to commit suicide, but with very different results. Beckett's tramps are thwarted in this project, as they are in any action they seek to pursue, and end the play in stasis, each with a bit of the broken rope they hoped to use for hanging themselves. The ending of *al-Farafir* is surely intended both to recall *Godot* and to present an alternative to it. Idris' Master and Farfur also decide to end their suffering and questioning by hanging themselves, and nooses obligingly drop from the flies. They climb onto chairs, put their heads in the nooses, the light goes out, and when they come on Farfur and his Master are dead, though still able to speak. They discover that they have become atoms, or even subatomic particles, condemned for all eternity to continue their relationship, the weaker Farfur spinning endlessly around his more powerful master. In vain the whirling and weeping Farfur calls out to the audience to find a solution. The curtain falls with him spinning, apparently forever. The stasis of *Waiting for Godot* has been replaced here by what seems to me an even darker picture, of a universe that is not without meaning, but one which has an all-too-clear organizing principle, the strong and the weak locked in an eternal and cruel relationship that extends from sub-atomic particles through man and out into the entire universe.

Whether Idris in *al-Farafir* has created, as he hoped, a model for a new mode of Egyptian comedy, he has surely achieved something else, the creation of one of the most powerful and darkest of the dark comedies of the late twentieth century. The German dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt, writing in 1954, at almost the same moment when Idris was developing his argument for a new drama, suggested that the modern world, anonymous and bureaucratic, no longer offered a dramatist the possibility of tragedy, although the tragic sense was still a central fact of life. This, Dürrenmatt argued, must now be sought in comedy, a dark comedy in which the senselessness and hopelessness of the world finds expression.<sup>4</sup> Idris' *al-Farafir*, it seems to me, is one of the most successful and powerful plays to fulfill that dark mission of modern comedy.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Roger Allen, *Critical Perspectives on Yusuf Idris*, Three Continents Press, 1994.
- <sup>2</sup> See, for example, M.M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, 74, p. 156.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibrahim Hamadah, ed., *Khayal al-zill*, Cairo, 1963, p. 144.
- <sup>4</sup> Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Writings on Theatre and Drama*, (trans. H.M. Waidson) London, 1976, pp. 81-82.

## BETWEEN COMEDY AND TRAGEDY The Grotesque in Tawfiq Al-Hakim's 'The Sultan's Dilemma'

Hassan EL-MNIAI<sup>1</sup>

It is not an easy task for Theatre-Studies scholars to list all different genres of comedy from the first pioneers such as Cratinus, Eupolis, and Aristophanes, to the most recent models of twentieth-century comedy. There is no clear-cut definition of comedy. The rich diversity of comedy includes different forms of comicality, such as farce, satire, fabliaux, and parody, as well as forms of popular comedy such as the *Commedia dell'arte*. Like tragedy, comedy remains a problematic genre that is subject to numerous theoretical disputes. In this context, the tragic poet Friedrich Schiller maintains that comedy contains more noble objectives than tragedy, and that the latter in all its forms would be superficial or even impossible if comedy were to achieve its aims. But is it possible for comedy to do so?

The answer to such a puzzling question remains unattainable, for comedy escapes fixity and overly reductive stereotypes due to its dialectical oscillation between two tendencies: the separation from tragedy on the one hand, and the containment of the tragic on the other. This dialectical nature makes comedy an open genre that escapes finiteness and closure. Moreover, the different forms and names ascribed to modern comedy are integral parts of the new artistic and cultural dynamics of the 'Serious Comedy' that Diderot sees as a call for the death of tragedy and its replacement by comedy. The same tendency is also manifested in Surrealist and Absurd drama. In this context, Martin Esslin confirms that the Theatre of the Absurd is a comic theatre even though its subject matter is essentially serious, violent, and bitter. In *The Death of Tragedy* (1963) however, George Steiner expresses his scepticism towards the continuity of tragedy in the modern epoch, and suggests instead that dark comedy might be the suitable alternative form for contemporary writers. For the same reasons we find Ionesco naming his dramas 'quasi-drama' or 'tragic-comedy', for he firmly believes that the comic is tragic in its very essence, and the tragedy of modern Man invokes bitter laughter. The same thing can be said about the modern comedy of Samuel Beckett, who classified his English version of *Waiting for Godot* (1954) as a tragi-comedy, locating himself within an old trajectory that fuses the two genres together.

It is known that the concept of tragi-comedy was deployed for the first time by the comic playwright Plautus (184-251 BCE), in the prologue of his *Amphitryon*, which has mythical proportions and a rhythm that fuses light comedy and psychological elements. Its characters also blend sacred and human attributes. Yet Plautus' emphasis is on contradictory aspects of life and the reversal of roles with the resulting comic effects such as the transformation of Mercury from the status of a God into a slave who is sold in the marketplace as a commodified object. Such emphasis on the contradictions that lie at the heart of human existence precipitated an artistic tendency that calls for the subversion of the outdated classical rules of tragedy. The result is the birth of tragi-comedy in Italy, England, and France since the sixteenth century. It also flourished in Germany with the advent of the Romantic Movement, before it became established as a contemporary dramatic genre that is criss-crossed by other theatrical sensibilities such as the absurd and the grotesque.

It is evident that the state of uncertainty that overwhelms Western Man, added to his anxiety, loneliness, and the pressure of religious, social, and political problematics, caused the fusion of comedy and tragedy. The Arab subject has always been at the heart of such changes, though from a subaltern position. The familiarity of Arab theatre makers with comic dialectics has been conspicuous since their earliest appropriation of the Western theatrical medium as manifested in its Italian form. Their deployment of European comedy started with the adaptation of *The Miser* from Molière by the Syrian author Marun Annakach who became the father of modern Arabic drama.

### Hybridization

The historical development of Arabic theatre has been a vital source of artistic diversity at the level of dramatic writing, theatre making, and the implementation of theatrical discourse. Egyptian author Tawfiq Al-Hakim, who made use of tragedies as well as moral comedies, is an exemplary first instance of an Arab playwright who mediates between the Arab Self and its Western Other, and who believes that the Arabic heritage is part of our common human heritage. *The Bewildered Sultan/The Sultan's Dilemma*<sup>2</sup> is one of Al-Hakim's plays that can be described as a tragi-comedy due to the co-existence of tragic and satirical elements in its general structure. Such hybridization makes the play a modern drama with grotesque tendencies. And since the function of the grotesque transcends the limits of reality while striving to present a faithful image of the world, Al-Hakim explores grotesque elements through the representation of

hierarchical power structures within the parameters of social criteria.

Through dramatic situations that subvert traditional power symbols, we observe the king's being sold in the marketplace since he is declared a white slave who hasn't been liberated by his owner. Ironically, a beautiful woman buys the enslaved king, while his corrupt minister's lust for power is presented without limits. As to the judge, he is ready to violate the sanctity of the law when necessary.... Besides these characters, the play also presents other classes of society such as the shoemaker, the drinker, and the Mother-figure. The grotesque aspect of the play is achieved through these dramatic personae who are thrown into a world that masks the frailty of power structures (e.g., the king must be liberated in order to be eligible to perform his duty, and the character of the beautiful woman by the end of the play is found to be that of a noble woman, despite the previous biased attitudes that surrounded her).

If the grotesque is based on some general principles that fuse noble and evil characters together, and privileges the subversion of the centre by the agencies of marginality, part of its objective is also the foregrounding of egocentric bodies who are forced into being open toward the surrounding world. Thus the sultan begins as a closed body who becomes open toward the beautiful woman, for the two of them are victims. Their very presence within the course of the main event is determined by a satirical but tragic rhythm. For all these reasons, I classified this play as a comedy that is metaphorically grotesque, for its reading can be achieved through various intellectual, historical, political, and philosophical levels. In other words, the tragic structure of *The Bewildered Sultan* is based upon two characters that face their personal destinies. However, this structure is supplemented by a deeply rooted irony that is manifest in various situations such as

- the affiliation of the white slaver's destiny (death penalty) with *Athaan al-Fajr*;
- the hangman's rudeness because he sees in fulfilling his duty a task that deserves the acknowledgement of his condemned victim. That is why the hangman asks his victim to create the appropriate psychological conditions by not annoying him with tormenting questions, inviting him for a drink, and then singing for him so that he can perform his duty in an accurate way;
- the Sultan is sold for a second time by the very same white slaver;
- the judge declares that the Sultan is a barren and unprofitable commodity who is not worth even the price of a mule;
- selling the Sultan creates ironic situations since he is considered the utmost absurd spectacle in the world. Conversely, the bar owner sees the enslaved Sultan as an opportunity to attract customers, while the shoemaker sees him as a burden since the Sultan does not know how to mend shoes. Moreover, a mother refuses to buy him for her child since he is not suited to be a child's toy.

These are some exemplary scenes that construe the play's conflictual situations along with its subversive positions and tragic dimensions.

### Metaphorical undertaking

All these phenomena prove that Al-Hakim's theatrical discourse is not concerned with an historical subject per se, but with the human implications of such relationships as that between the beautiful woman and the Sultan, who vainly strives to achieve a heroic position via his awareness of his plight and submission to the law. At the end, he realises that such nobleness exists only in simple people, like the beautiful woman who is tormented by the general opinion but firmly resists all prejudice, unlike the corrupt minister and the judges. And when the Sultan wants to give her back the amount that she paid to purchase him, she not only refuses the money but also the corundum that he presented to her as a gift. As a result, the Sultan is shocked into awareness and before leaving says to her, "I will never ever forget that I was once your slave" (176).

The beautiful woman recognizes the disparity between her distorted image in public opinion and her real image that was unmasked by the Sultan during their brief encounter. For that reason, she firmly defended her right to own the Sultan with his proper consent. But when the Sultan asks her about his duties while residing in her house, her answer is intricately informed by wisdom and tolerance: "As simple as that: You are a Sultan during the day. So, I shall deliver you to the State the whole day. Yet when the night falls, come back to me." (122). Through this answer that comes right before the Sultan's statement (I will never ever forget that I was once your slave), and the beautiful woman's declaration (for the sake of the law, Sir), the two victims reach their proper redemption and transcend their painful tragic predicaments. All these compel us to confirm once again that *The Bewildered Sultan* is a metaphorical undertaking that is based upon an ancient historical event. But Tawfiq Al-Hakim transposes it to our contemporary scene with a grotesque tendency that aims at reconstructing the Arabic/Egyptian society rather than reproducing a homogeneous image of such a society.

(Translated from Arabic by **Khalid Amine**)

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Hassan El Mniai, Senior Lecturer of Theatre Studies at the Faculty of Humanities, Dhar El-Mehras, Fez

<sup>2</sup> Tawfik Al-Hakim, *The bewildered Sultan* (Almatbaa An-namoudajiya), Cairo, n.d.. The English translation, 1981, carries the title *The Sultan's Dilemma*.

## PERFORMING ARISTOPHANES' *LYSISTRATA* ON THE ARABIC STAGE

By Marina KOTZAMANI

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* is one of the world's foremost anti-war plays. Written and produced during the Peloponnesian civil war between Athens and Sparta the play expresses strong criticism of the war. Its basic premise is that all the women of Greece, under the leadership of Lysistrata go on a sex strike so as to pressure the men to stop fighting. They also occupy the Acropolis, the symbol of Athenian democracy, transgressing on a traditionally male space, to prevent men from getting money for the war. In Aristophanes' comic utopia sex and politics are inextricably bound: peace is identified with sex and war with the absence of it. The universal sex strike is successful, as men find it impossible to do without sex and the comedy has a happy, though ironic, ending.

Whatever the meaning of the play in Antiquity, *Lysistrata* has strongly fascinated modern audiences and has been by far the most frequently performed Aristophanic comedy of the 20th century in the West.<sup>1</sup> The comedy has been interpreted in very diverse ways, ranging from interpretations exploring female sexuality to versions in support of political activism, whether feminist or socialist.<sup>2</sup> In the contemporary period, the *Lysistrata Project 2003* has once again highlighted the significance of the comedy as a classic: an open ended work that can be shaped to respond to cultural concerns across time and geography.

### 1000 Readings

As part of the *Lysistrata Project*, over 1.000 readings of the play were organized throughout the world on March 3rd 2003, to protest the war of the US against Iraq that was then imminent.<sup>3</sup> This innovative project that would not have been possible without the resources of the internet sustains a strong 20th century tradition of regarding *Lysistrata* as an activist play and attempts to reformulate its politics on a global scale. While the majority of participations in the *Lysistrata Project* were from the West, a few readings were held in Arabic countries, particularly in the Mediterranean region. These readings stimulated my curiosity: what does it mean to stage *Lysistrata* today for Arabic audiences? *Performing*