

the play wants to transmit is bitter rather than comforting or optimistic. Still, it is the reference to the *Thousand and one nights* and its narrative world, its sense of irony, parody and subversiveness which in these two cases save the comic purport of the plays. The narrative context secures the comic nature of the unravelling of the intertwinement of illusions and power.

Notes

- ¹ For a general outline of the various genres of the Arabic literary tradition, see: R. Allen, *The Arabic literary heritage; the development of its genres and criticism*, Cambridge, 1998.
- ² See: S. Moreh, *Live theatre and dramatic literature in the medieval Arab world*, New York, 1992.
- ³ For a discussion of the textual history of the *Thousand and one nights*, see: U. Marzolph/ R. van Leeuwen, *The Arabian nights encyclopedia*, 2 vols, Santa Barbara, 2004; for a summary of the story of 'Shahriyâr and his brother' and references concerning the story, see: id., vol. 2, pp. 370 ff., and the index.
- ⁴ R. van Leeuwen, 'The art of interruption: The *Thousand and one nights* and Jan Potócki,' *Middle Eastern Literatures*, vol. 7 (2004), no. 2, pp. 183-198.
- ⁵ For the connections between the *Thousand and one nights* and the emergence of modern Arabic theatre, see: Marzolph/ Van Leeuwen (2004), vol. 2, article 'Theater', with references; M.M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic drama in Egypt*, Cambridge 1987; id., *Early Arabic Drama*, Cambridge 1988; R. Bencheneb, 'Les dramaturges arabes et le récit-cadre des Mille et une nuits,' *Revue de l'Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée*, vol. 18, (1974), pp.7-18; id., 'Les Mille et une nuits et les origines du théâtre arabe,' *Studia Islamica*, vol. 40 (1974), pp.133-160; id., 'Les Mille et une nuits et le théâtre arabe au Xxsiècle', *Studia Islamica*, Vol. 45 (1977), pp.101-137
- ⁶ For this essay I have used the English translation by Roger Allen, since the Arabic text was not available to me at the time of writing: S. Kh. Jayyusi/ R. Allen (eds), *Modern Arabic Drama; an Anthology*, Bloomington/ Indianapolis 1995, pp. 305-351; A. Farag, 'Ali Janah al-Tabrizi and his servant Quffa.'
- ⁷ See Marzolph/ Van Leeuwen, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 100-101 (in the Bûlâq edition, nights 308-327).
- ⁸ Id., op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 120-1 (night 32).
- ⁹ Id., op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 99-100 (nights 294-296).
- ¹⁰ Id., op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 291-293 (nights 989-1000).
- ¹¹ An English translation of the play can be found in M. Manzalaoui, *Arabic Writing Today*, vol. 3, *Drama*, Cairo 1977; references are to this translation.
- ¹² Manzalaoui, op. cit., p. 507.
- ¹³ Id., op. cit., p. 507.
- ¹⁴ Id., op. cit., p. 496.
- ¹⁵ Id., op. cit., p. 497.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF YUSUF IDRIS' *AL-FARAFIR* TO EGYPTIAN AND WORLD COMEDY

Marvin CARLSON

Although Yusuf Idris is one of the most widely read short-story writers of the Arab world, he also produced a significant body of drama, among which his 1964 work *al-Farafir (The Flipflaps)* holds the pre-eminent position, both for the richness and originality of its dramatic themes and construction but also because it is one of the first major attempts to explore the potential of a specifically Egyptian dramatic expression. Idris' first three plays, written in the mid 1950s, were dramas of social realism, clearly reflecting the interests of the new era and in form and concerns very similar to the work of other contemporary Egyptian dramatists. The first two, both short, dealt with the sufferings of the poor and exploited while the third, Idris' first full-length play *Al-Lahza al-Harija (The Critical Moment, 1957)* deals with the effects of the Suez war on a middle-class Egyptian family and a British soldier. During the seven years following this play, Idris wrote nothing more for the theatre, devoting himself instead to short stories and journalism. During this time, however, he later reported that he devoted much thought to the problem creation of a new kind of Egyptian drama, one that would be truly Egyptian both in subject matter and technique instead of the work based on Western models, which up until then had dominated both modern Egyptian drama and indeed modern Arabic drama in general. To this end he developed an approach, which he outlined and defended in an influential series of articles entitled *Our Egyptian Theatre*, published in 1965 in the leading literary periodical, *al-Kitab*.¹

Actually the program Idris proposed in these articles, both in its motivation and its strategies, was not radically different from that suggested by al-Hakim in a preface to his drama *Ya Tali al-Shajara/ The treeclimbers* three years before, but the far great visibility of the journal *al-Kitab* brought these arguments to the forefront of Egyptian literary discussion and encouraged the idea, still widely held among writers on the modern Egyptian theatre, that al-Hakim's drama remained essentially in the tradition of the European avant-garde (and in particular of its most recent manifestation, the Theatre of the Absurd), while Idris opened the way to a distinctly different, Egyptian-based mode of experimental drama.²

Certainly Idris' rhetoric was perfectly adapted to the new nationalist and populist spirit of post-Suez Egypt. Hitherto neglected folk and popular forms of entertainment not only began to receive unprecedented scholarly attention, they began also to attract the interest of experimental artists. The medieval Arabic oral rhymed narration, the *maqama*, began to attract the attention of modern poets, as did the shadow play tradition, the *Karagoz*, that was closely related to it. The remarkably complex and sophisticated thirteenth century shadow plays called *babat*, created by Ibn Daniyal in Cairo, were published for the first time in 1963. A highly developed performance consciousness was clearly apparent in these early works, indeed the introductory remarks to the first, *Tayf al-Khayal/ The Shadow Spirit* provide a significant defense of the power of theatrical embodiment, calling performance "a supreme art which by the very fact of substantiation, will supersede that which is mere imagination."³ Suddenly a native and popular performance tradition long predating the modern European-oriented theatre of the Middle East began to come to the attention of scholars and theatre artists of that region, with significant influence in the work of both.

Uniquely Egyptian

Idris' series of articles in *al-Kitab* fitted perfectly into this new orientation. He argued that what had been accepted as the Egyptian drama up to the present time, traditional or experimental, successful or not, had been written according to Western models, and that the time had come to develop a drama that was uniquely Egyptian. Like the new government, he advocated a turning away from the traditional European-oriented "high art" to seek inspiration in indigenous local and folk manifestations, such as the *maqama*, the shadow theatre, or the village *samir*, a popular festival in which villagers gather to improvise entertainments involving singing, dancing and impersonation. Idris' campaign to free himself from European traditions led him somewhat paradoxically but not inconsistently, to develop a strategy exactly parallel to that of an important segment of the European avant-garde, seeking a regeneration of the drama by a sophisticated reworking of popular and folk traditions.

In terms of physical staging, the most important source of Idris' new concept was apparently the village *samir*, and its most important feature the breaking down of the barrier between performers and audience, so that the drama becomes a truly collective group experience instead of a remote illusory world created for passive spectators. In the prefatory notes to *al-Farafir* therefore he rejects the traditional fourth-wall proscenium theatre of the West, asking instead for a circle

of audience members around the action, with performers emerging from this circle and blending back into it as needed. He also suggested, like Brecht, that actors never lose themselves completely in the parts, but always remain in some measure a part of the surrounding community.

A major early Egyptian comic drama came to the attention of the Egyptian literary world just as Idris was writing *al-Farfur*, the shadow plays of the Cairo oculist Ibn Daniyal. Although Idris looked to the live performances of village culture for his general approach to staging, the surprisingly sophisticated Ibn Daniyal plays also clearly provided him with suggestive devices. The author who presents *al-Farfur* introduces the play and its main character just as the Presenter does in Ibn Daniyal's theatre, and indeed the entrance of the clown figure Farfur seems directly modeled on the shadow clown Tayl al-Khayal, "swirling like a tornado, circling around the stage" and striking out randomly with his loud cracking stick. Of course the crudely physical, irreverent clown is a popular favorite in almost all folk literature. The Western drama has produced examples in every era, from classic Greece and Rome onward, but certainly Idris could also claim the figure as well grounded also in the Egyptian folk tradition. Not only the shadow theatre, as in the work of Ibn Daniyal, but the oral stories of the *maqama* and more recently, such popular turn-of-the-century folk entertainers like Ali al-Kassar and Najib al-Rihani, also relied strongly on this character type.

Like the Presenter in the traditional shadow play, the Author in *al-Farafir* remains basically outside the action, appearing only when needed to comment on the action or give it a push forward. Idris takes him in a quite new direction, however, first by suggesting that as the author-creator of this dramatic universe, he serves as a kind of God figure, although a highly impotent one, and secondly, having established this association, by having the author become younger and possessed of even less control and power with each successive appearance until he finally disappears from the universe of the play altogether. This leaves the play to spin on without an author in a manner clearly parallel to the universe spinning on without a controlling God, which the dark vision of the play continually suggests.

Absurd tradition

Al-Farafir, for all of Idris' concerns to create a distinctly Egyptian work, shows distinct influences of the French so-called Theatre of the Absurd, as do many other plays created in the Arab world, and particularly in Egypt, Syria, and

Morocco in the mid-1960s. Tayeb Saddiki pioneered this theatre in the Arab world with his translations in 1957 of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Ionesco's *Amédée*, while in the fall of 1962 the Egyptian avant-garde director Sad Ardash presented translations of Beckett's *Endgame* and Ionesco's *The Chairs* in Cairo. The play usually cited as the first Arabic example of the Theatre of the Absurd, Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Ya Tali ash-Shagara* appeared in 1962 and was inspired in part, its author claimed, by Ionesco and Beckett plays al-Hakim had seen in Paris in 1957, but the translations and performances in Cairo and elsewhere in the early 1960s brought the style of these dramatists into general circulation in the Arab theatre world.

When the Author/God figure in *al-Farafir* departs, like the missing Godot, from his world, he leaves behind The Master and Farfur, who will almost certainly in their cross-talk, their routines, and their desperate and ultimately unsuccessful quest for purpose and meaning suggest to any modern theatre-goer Beckett's absurdist clowns Vladimir and Estragon. I will return presently to this parallel, but for the moment must remark that both Beckett and Idris are here both drawing upon comic prototypes that go far back in the history of comedic performance. Roman comedy often utilized contrasting servant types, one heavy and dull, the other sharp-witted and mercurial, a comic pairing that was repeated in the *Commedia dell'arte*, in Molière, and on into the many contrasting clowns of vaudeville and early film comedy such as Laurel and Hardy and Abbot and Costello. Equally basic to the Western dramatic tradition was the pairing of master and servant for comic purposes, the craft and wiliness of one countering the financial and social power of the other.

The parallels between the situations in *al-Farafir* and *Waiting for Godot* create a particularly close bond between these two experimental works, but this by no means diminishes Idris' claim to have drawn upon Egyptian and Arabic source material. The contrasting comic pair, like the subversive clown, is found as widely in the Arabic tradition as they are in the comic repertoire of Europe. The wily Karagoz and overbearing Hacivad of the shadow theatre are found, in many forms throughout the Middle Eastern puppet tradition, and the most popular and familiar characters in the work of Najib al-Rihani, who may be said to have founded modern Egyptian comedy at the opening of the twentieth century are the pompous Kish Kish Bey and his servant and bodyguard Zu'rab.

Idris, perhaps in the spirit of the absurd, suggested that the two acts of *al-Farafir* could be played in either order, as some readers have also suggested for *Waiting for Godot*, but I would strongly disagree with this in both cases. Despite

the repetitions and sense of stasis generated by both plays, there is a clear progression, a deepening in both plays. This may be clearly seen in the evolution of the Author, who appears in the first act as a fullgrown man, then at half his original size, then as an offstage voice. In the second act other offstage voices inform the Master that the Author, like Godot "left a long time ago" for parts unknown and may return "tomorrow or maybe the day after," or "maybe in a thousand years" or indeed not at all. In fact, unlike Godot, he does return, later in this act, as what seems to be an infant wrapped in a bundle, but the bundle contains only smaller and smaller bundles until at the last nothing is left, like the famous onion of *Peer Gynt*.

There is also an important, and distinct progression in the contents of the two acts of *al-Farafir*. The first act centers on personal and domestic themes. It contains an extended sequence making fun of various possible professions the two protagonists might pursue. Farfur suggests the roles of intellectual, artist, singer, song-writer, lawyer, doctor, accountant, football player, announcer, Western-style beggar, thief, government official, engineer, taxi-driver, bus conductor, and police informer, each proposal sparking some amusing social commentary. Finally the Master settles on the profession of grave-digger. A life role selected, the two turn to the matter of marriage. This also gives rise to a variety of comic discussion and business, including rival feuding wives for the Master and a tall ugly cross-dressed man for Farfur, but at last both settle into domesticity, have children, and feel the need for housekeeping money. To provide business for grave-digging, the Master kills a volunteer from the audience, whom Farfur then refuses to bury, fleeing the stage. Thus ends the first act.

The second act moves to larger concerns, to history and then to the cosmos. When Farfur returns, after fifteen minutes according to him and centuries according to his master, he comes pushing a handcart with the rag and bone detritus of history, bits and pieces of guns, aircraft, and other instruments of oppression and destruction from Europe and America. He and the Master exchange news of their children. The Master boasts of his offspring Alexander, Napoleon, Mussolini and Hitler, who have become model grave-diggers, burying millions, while Farfur has provided the mostly dark-skinned slaves and victims of oppression. Seeking to discover a more positive social order they try reversing roles, both becoming servants, and then both becoming masters, none of which alternatives is found to be natural or satisfying.

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.⁴ 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

- ¹ See Roger Allen, *Critical Perspectives on Yusuf Idris*, Three Continents Press, 1994.
- ² See, for example, M.M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Drama*, 74, p. 156.
- ³ Ibrahim Hamadah, ed., *Khayal al-zill*, Cairo, 1963, p. 144.
- ⁴ 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'

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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.