

On Theater after Tahreer Square Performing Arts After the Revolution

By Adel Abdel Wahab – Theater Director

It is natural for the cultural and artistic scene to be one of the most sensitive fields to 'Change' before and after it happens. Such an assumed reality applies for sure to the Egyptian cultural and artistic scene after January 2011 Revolution which came to raise many questions hopes for everyone from the arts, at their diverse fields.

Taking a glance back, we can easily observe the level and type of influence, many historic periods and successive governments in Egypt had left on the 'cultural and artistic' fields. There, for example, the emergence of the vast majority of artists' staff of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, which is a giant entity that owns several arms where the nucleus of its current structure came during the sixties as the Socialist State - at that time - adopted 'Culture' as an arm to spread its ideology and to raise awareness. There as well, another working group that came into being in the late eighties and early nineties as Liberalism and Openness were rooted in the culture – also at that time - and thus the Socialist System became obliged to be influenced by the moral dimension of the Liberal Capitalist System. Such influence was reflected largely through the emergence of civic and cultural entities which were/are not under the control of the Central Ministry that sets public policy for the Culture in the country. As the formation of these groups - and many others - had come as a result of different realities and conditions undergone by the Egyptian society, their presence and performance had significantly impacted the cultural and artistic fields as a whole.

Later on and in line of many other relevant events both in Egypt, the region and beyond, there came the emergence of diverse independent artistic groups – including theater - and of private publishing houses which took place in the early nineties and until 2011-2012. In sequence, the persistence of these initiatives to exist and not surrender despite being subjected to tough restrictions and policies as well as high competition from relevant government entities had enabled them to gain a strong voice and to actively engage in the Revolution's popular movement (Egypt so called "Spring") as this space identified as the Art "independent or alternative" scene also includes rights activists and politicians as well as NGOs workers.

The emergence of "liberation – expression Generation" after the Revolution ..

The "Tahrir Square" formed a 'safe public space' for many of those engaged in the Art "independent/alternative scene" and imposed an important approach on the 'prevailing approach based on exclusion'; "pluralism." It also provided, to those young participating members - even if had not been exposed to such types of alternative art extensively before -, an opportunity to learn through 'an open workshop' which goals intersects between arts, human rights and political education and activism.

Such an approach was captured consciously - or unconsciously – by few performing arts initiatives launched before the Egyptian Revolution such as "the People's Coral" Project which started only few months before the breakthrough of the revolution under the name of "the Complaints Coral." This project is a duplication of an existing European Project and its value is

stemmed from its main goal; for people to express their opinions, thoughts and demands. Through this experience, we see about fifty performers singing with one voice on stage; a method identified with the idea of the “Revolution” (or Tahreer Square Phenomena) where the collective became one and connected. Therefore, those taking part in such a project and experience, must be individuals who reject exclusion and believe in pluralism; they must as well with time, lose the image in the ‘one and only star’ or the ‘one creative sole’ which in itself a reflection for the fall of the “sole inspiring leader who knows it all’ idea or conviction. A good number of Art Groups adopted such a method and thus we have recently seen in many theatrical and musical performances, a theater full of performers inspired by the ‘collective’s state of creativity’.

The experiences for sure are diverse and differ. Some have theatrical traditions where its substance, directors and performers are all professionals while others are initiated by groups of amateurs or interested individuals who are for experimentation and expression. What seems to be of real value while monitoring ‘recent’ changes in the ‘performing arts’ scene in Egypt, is the fact that is that there is a generation of ‘performing arts practitioners’ that carry the responsibility of ‘expression’ through delivering messages which they believe to be of great value and importance. Accordingly, we are witnessing a movement which contributes largely to spreading such methods and messages and imposes its presence on those rejecting them; the conservatives who reject all types of art for ideological reasons as well as other artists in official positions (government staff). And while such a movement hopes to and could act as ‘pressure groups’ on decision-makers, it does not necessarily produces aesthetics and artistic innovations in theater performances that aims to summon the “Tahreer Square Phenomena” be it through the presence of a large group of performers on stage at the same time, in one scene or throughout the whole performance.

Some of these examples are: the "Last Days of Dina’s Mother” performance for Hala Theater Group directed by Mohamed Abdel-Fattah (Kalabala), "Tahreer Tales” performance directed by Sondos Shabayek, and "Simply like This” performance for Ana Al Hikaya Group directed by Reem Hatem. The last two performances intersects in the idea of retelling and diagnosing tales from the revolution, and the first one is a cynical performance that criticizes political attitudes and media entities and builds on the hypothesis that, media in Egypt, is simply an extension of the legalized prostitution which existed since the time of Monarchy and till the "January 2011 Revolution" through tracking Dina’s mother character which is a nationalist prostitute who played many roles in all stages of the modern era in Egypt.

The title "liberation – expression Generation" did not come to assume that these experiences (and others) had come only because their initiators were present and active in Tahreer Square and the Revolution or for the fact that they were inspired by the idea of ‘pluralism and collectiveness’. It rather came to emphasize on the importance of monitoring the emergence of a ‘generation/movement’ which embraces more direct methodologies and less research and quality on the artistic level though with more abilities to spreading such methods and messages. This in return enabled them to gain lots of respect and appreciation than many others; and especially by groups and individuals from other generations and larger institutions which may have accused them - at some point – of lacking skills and methodologies but now started to adapt their approaches, utilizing their audiences and produces performances with similar structure and ideas.

Furthermore, there were also other artistic experiences which basically came to build on their existing 'political point of view' but through a more direct approach and with minimum technical and artistic complexities such as "No time for Art ... Greetings to the Martyrs" performance directed by Laila Soliman and which was followed by another one for her that adapted a more complicated artistic method under the name of the "Lessons of the Revolution" where the theatrical scene is more vibrant and diverse.

Spaces and Projects ...

Many of those engaged in the cultural "independent / alternative scene" – institutions and individuals - benefited and seized the 'new reality gained' of being and performing in open public spaces during the first days of Tahreer and beyond. In sequences, there come "Al Fann Meedan (art is a space)" Carnival which is a one-day event where art performances (without any determinants of technical and quality standards) are lined up one after the other in "Abdeen Square" at the heart of downtown Cairo and very near to "Tahrir Square." This Carnival was initiated by the "Culture Independent Coalition" which is a group formed of number of institutions and artists that emerged without necessarily any clear vision or long term strategy just like many other political coalitions after the revolution. The coalition was called-for by a number of people who have considerable prestige and capabilities from the independent scene and later were joined by a number of institutions and individuals interested in resistance and change as well as existence.

Few projects emerged were launched by individual artists and later turned more into 'social campaigns' such as the "Egyptian Project for Theater of the Oppressed" launched by the Writer and Director Nora Amin. This project is based on the "Theater of the Oppressed" methodology created by the Brazilian theater director & writer, Augusto Boal, at times of liberation and political revolt against the military dictatorship and political repression in Brazil and which later on became an Internationally acknowledge methodology. The project utilized and benefited from the State structure through a special MoU for the use of the so called "Cultural Palaces" (Government owned spaces in the different governorates which belong to the Sixties era and strategy) for the cause of theater training and production in maybe more than 10 different governorates in Egypt. Similar to this, there is also the "Bossy Project" which is for the director who produced "Tahreer Tales" (Sondos Shabayek) and belongs to the same work approach; tales placed sequentially to form a theatrical show with one theme. Such approach is very direct and aims at raising awareness and expressing self in a direct manner as well. The project was constructed based on an artistic methodology called the "Vagina Monologs" which is known as a 'feminist approach' and its latest production is on the subject of harassment in Egypt.

Theater Forums and Festivals ...

"Independent - Combo" Festival is an event for Performing Arts organized on monthly bases and aims significantly to stimulate the idea of 'the market and existence (or imposing presence)'; it enforces almost no restrictions and the performances are divers and with various directions and methods, all in one program marketed to the target audience. What makes this event unique is the fact that it contains both theater and music performance thus benefiting from such audience and building for the concept of "Independent Arts' Box Office" which does not exist as the laws are not in support of it and also because many of the independent Arts and Cultural spaces believe that art should reach to the public without a fee or because their legal status does not

allow them to have a Box Office. The festival took place at 'Rawabet Theater' in downtown Cairo more than once. "Theater .. is a Must" Festival is a Theater Forum which aims at promoting the idea that theater is a 'life necessity' and tries to bring together many of the different experiences that connected with the current political events and popular activism. "Theater ... is a Must" succeeded in its first round to include 9 nights of theater performances in Alexandria at Saint Gabriel School's Theater and at the French Cultural Center in addition to two street performances.

In closing, it is important to highlight that this article aimed only at monitoring recent changes in the 'performing arts' scene in Egypt after the revolution / "Tahreer Phenomena" as well as its sensitivity to the changing political and social conditions assessing especially the artistic vision and production approaches. In addition, it also aimed at assessing current assets and opportunities through listing some experiences and analyzing the performing arts scene within the context of change and transformation. Thus, the article only focused on current experiences in the performing art scene in Egypt and did not include a view for any of the foregone ones.

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