

Modern Arabic Drama : Tawfiq al-Hakim

French and Italian influence. Modern Arabic drama has from the beginning been heavily shaped by the influence of the French theater and Italian opera. In all of pre-modern Arabic literature, only a handful of dramatic texts can be identified, such as the shadow plays of Shams al-Din Muhammad Ibn Daniyal (d. 1311). The pioneer of modern Arab drama was the wealthy Lebanese Christian merchant Marun al-Naqqash (1817-1855), who had traveled to Italy and fallen in love with opera and the theater. In 1850, he staged a play titled *al-Bakhil* (*The Miser*), an adaptation of Molière's *L'Avare*, in his house in Beirut. His nephew Salim (d. 1884), continued his work, creating a theater company and traveling to Egypt, where Syrian Christians were entering journalism and other fields and had a profound impact on the development of the modern Egyptian theater. Jacob Sannu` (1839-1912), and Egyptian Jew, also drew on his experience with the theater in Italy to write a dozen plays which he staged for the Khedive Ismail (1863-1879) in 1870-72, including *The Two Co-Wives*, a satire of polygamy. Before Sannu` fell out of favor, the Khedive dubbed him "the Egyptian Molière". The nineteenth-century witnessed the translation and adaptation of many more European plays, and Jurj Abyad (1880-1959) was sent by the Khedive to Paris to study acting. Between the two world wars, the Egyptian National Theater Troupes was formed in 1935, and the prominent poet Ahmad Shawqi (1868-1932), tried his hand at drama, authoring plays in verse such as *The Death of Cleopatra* (1929), *Majnun and Layla* (1931), and *The Andalusian Princess* (1932). At the same time, Najib al-Rihani (1891-1949) formed the Comédie Franco-Arabe, which focused on humorous skits rather than high drama and led directly into the modern Egyptian tradition of comedic theater and the cinema, which produced the first short film in 1917 and the first talking picture, *Awlad al-Dhawat* (*Sons of the Wealthy*), in 1932. For most of the twentieth century, Egypt dominated Arab theater, cinema, radio, and television in the Arab world, but this has changed radically since the late twentieth century with the advent of satellite television and the development of strong traditions in Lebanon and elsewhere.

Tawfiq al-Hakim. Tawfiq al-Hakim was born in Alexandria in 1898. He had a strict, sheltered upbringing and was groomed for a career in the law, following the footsteps of his father, who served for many years as a judge in the Beheira province in the Nile delta. Tawfiq studied at the Faculty of Law in the new Egyptian University and was sent in 1925 to study for a doctorate in law in Paris. He returned three years later without having completed his degree but determined to chart a course as an intellectual. He had in his youth become involved by the theater, but because acting was looked upon as a frivolous and low activity associated with street performers and vulgar farces, he had concealed his involvement, writing articles on the theater under a pseudonym and composing plays anonymously. Apparently encouraged by what he saw in Paris, where theater had a quite different status, he began his career as a playwright and writer in earnest, though he continued to work as deputy prosecutor in Alexandria and in other positions in the judiciary in the provincial cities of Tanta, Damanhour, and Dessouk until 1943.

Al-Hakim's Plays. In 1933 he published his first major play, *Ahl al-Kahf* (*The People of the Cave*, 1933). The title refers to the 18th surah of the Qur'an, *Surat al-Kahf*, which includes a version of the story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, a Christian hagiographic tale youths who are miraculously saved from persecution by being put to sleep for over three hundred years, after which they awake and find that their society has changed completely. The Egyptian National Theatre Troupe, founded in 1935, chose this play for their first performance, but it was not successful. Like many of al-Hakim's plays, most of which were never actually staged, the play was too cerebral for most audiences, who preferred more action and light entertainment. Al-Hakim continued to write scores of plays that drew on Arabic and Islamic, Biblical, and world literature in order to make observations either on philosophical questions such as the conflict between everyday existence and ideals or on social and political issues in contemporary Egypt. In *Soft Hands* (1954), he celebrated the success of the 1952 revolution, portraying an idle, pampered prince of

the ancient regime who finds that he has no place in post-revolutionary society. *The Perplexed Sultan* (1960) uses the historical figure of a Mamluk sultan to discuss political legitimacy and the rule of law, evidently a commentary on Abdel Nasser's circumvention of the legal process in his creation of a repressive police state in the years after the revolution. The sultan finds out that he, a former slave, has never been legally manumitted and so is legally ineligible to rule unless he undergoes the public humiliation of being freed. Struggling with the tension between the high literary language and verisimilitude in dialogue, he wrote *al-Safqah* (*The Deal*, 1956) in what he called a "third language" between literary Arabic and Egyptian dialect: text that could be read as literary Arabic but would nevertheless be understood as near-ordinary speech. The attempt failed, because the actors immediately translated it into ordinary Egyptian dialect when they performed the play. In his later works, he wrote several plays belonging to the theatre of the absurd, including *Ya tali' al-shajarah* (*Tree-Climber*, 1966) and *The Fate of a Cockroach* (1966).

Other works. In addition to his plays, al-Hakim wrote many essays and several novels.

Return of the Spirit (1933) depicts events leading up to the revolution of 1919 from the point of view of a young, patriotic Egyptian while at the same time telling the entertaining story of an extended family's foibles. Naguib Mahfouz described al-Hakim's publication of *Return of the Spirit* (1933) as the true birth of the Arabic novel, and Mahfouz's novels, particularly the trilogy, may be seen as a continuation of this work. In *The Diary of a Country Prosecutor* (1937), al-Hakim draws on his own experience as a bureaucrat, describing the investigation of a murder in the countryside and exposing the corruption, inefficiency, and hypocrisy of the Egyptian judicial system. *A Sparrow from the East* (1938) is a somewhat autobiographical *Bildungsroman*, about an Egyptian, Muhsin, who travels to Paris to study. It treats the divide between Eastern and Western culture in facile terms, describing Easterners as romantic and spiritual, while Westerners are practical and unemotional. In *Return of Consciousness* (1974), al-Hakim described his initial enthusiasm for the 1952 revolution and then his disillusionment with the oppressive rule that followed. Al-Hakim thought of himself as an intellectual with a mission to reform Egypt following western models. He was evidently disappointed in his later years with his inability to improve Egyptian society in the ways he had hoped. He died in Cairo in 1987. While his works often appear didactic and patronizing, they include distinct moments of brilliant observation and insight and capture a large part of the history of modern Arabic drama.

Questions

What is the dilemma in the *Sultan's Dilemma*, how does it reflect on modern political history, and how is it resolved?

How is humor created in *The Donkey Market*?

Analyze *The Tree-Climber* and explain its surprising or odd elements. What large ideas does al-Hakim attempt to convey?

The Song of Death treats the issue of blood vengeance or vendetta in Upper (i.e., southern) Egypt. Can you identify any other works of world literature devoted to this topic? (You may use outside sources.) Is the point of the play only that vendetta should be abandoned, or does it convey a more general message?

Reading

The plays contained in *The Essential Tawfiq al-Hakim: The Sultan's Dilemma, The Tree Climber, The Donkey Market, and The Song of Death* (pp. 5-200).

Further Reading

Allen, Roger and Salma Jayyusi (eds.). *Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

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