

Theaters of Citizenship



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Theaters of Citizenship

*Aesthetics and Politics of Avant-Garde
Performance in Egypt*



Sonali Pahwa



NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS
EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

Northwestern University Press
www.nupress.northwestern.edu

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Pahwa, Sonali, 1976– author.

Title: Theaters of citizenship : aesthetics and politics of avant-garde performance in Egypt / Sonali Pahwa.

Other titles: Performance works.

Description: Evanston : Northwestern University Press, 2020. | Series: Performance works | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019022943 | ISBN 9780810141759 (paperback) | ISBN 9780810141766 (cloth) | ISBN 9780810141773 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Experimental theater—Egypt—History—21st century. | Street theater—Egypt—History—21st century. | Theater—Political aspects—Egypt—History—21st century.

Classification: LCC PN2971.5 .P34 2020 | DDC 792.02209620905—dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019022943>

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Nehad Selaiha,
an inspiring mentor to performers and scholars alike.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book germinated in a chance encounter with Egyptian theater while I was studying Arabic at the American University in Cairo in the summer of 1999. I had read a review of director Mohamed Sobhi's *Carmen* in the English-language weekly *Cairo Times*, and decided to test my fledgling Egyptian colloquial Arabic by going to watch the play at a downtown theater. I understood very few lines. The satire of Hosni Mubarak's pseudodemocratic regime felt powerful nonetheless, and it inspired me to think critically about the aesthetic, affective, and political dimensions of theater. In the years that followed, several mentors have helped me understand theater as a cultural phenomenon under dictatorship.

At Amherst College, Deborah Gewertz and Jamal Elias nurtured my interest in Egypt and anthropology with the kind of advising I only aspire to emulate. Amherst's dean of the faculty and Religion Department together funded my first trip to Cairo, where I researched my senior honors thesis on youth culture. Tayeb el-Hibri was a patient Arabic teacher, particularly when Egyptian youth slang deformed my classical Arabic. My gratitude also goes to my Egyptian sisters Rula and Rania Zaki, who took in a naive college student and did much to help her settle into Cairo. Their friendship over the years has made them the nicest kind of extended family.

Later, at Columbia University, Brinkley Messick and Lila Abu-Lughod were staunchly supportive advisers to a project they understandably found quixotic. Outside the Department of Anthropology, courses with Gayatri Spivak and Peggy Phelan were key to refining my ideas. The late Pierre Cachia also shared his wisdom about performance in the Cairo of his childhood. Elliott Colla, Deborah Kapchan, and Rosalind Morris offered further feedback and stimulating critique. The loyal friendship of Sofian Merabet and Ruchi Chaturvedi amplified New York's charms. Sofian has continued to read drafts and encourage me through the project's twists and turns, for which I am ever grateful. I owe a further debt to Nadia Latif and Ben Sampson for their support during a spell of writing when I navigated four flights of stairs with a broken foot.

An International Predissertation Fellowship from the Social Science Research Council (2001–2) was transformative in allowing me to spend a year in Cairo under the tutelage of Dr. Nehad Selaiha, dean of the Arts Criticism Institute at the Academy of Arts. When the Theater Institute's administrators would not let me enroll, Dr. Nehad took me under her wing and introduced me to

everyone in the independent theater movement. She was the most formative influence on this book, and I regret that she is no longer alive to see it. Her friends and protégés have remained my guides through Cairo's theater world ever since: Nora Amin, Sameh Ezzat, Hassan el-Getrely, Hany El-Metennawy, Rasha Abdel Moneim, Hamada Shousha, Reham Zein, and others. Moreover, Abeer Ali, Ahmed el-Attar, Hazem Azmy, Mirette Mikhail, Khaled el-Sawy, and Effat Yehia have been enormously helpful and insightful colleagues. Their patient answers to my questions (sometimes by email from New York) shed much light on my path to understanding their work. Their theater world as I describe it is now past, but I hope my analysis does justice to it.

I was lucky to learn at the start of my anthropological career that relationships made in "the field" keep a research program alive with the allure of going back to meet old friends. Sameh and Reham were my companions at many plays and introduced me to many corners of downtown Cairo. Elisabetta Ciuccarelli, Jakob Lindfors, Lucia Sorbera, and Matteo Vivianetti were youthful coconspirators in various urban adventures. Later, Yasser Abdellatif, Iman Mersal, Sara Sedrak, and Randa Shaath enlivened evenings at the Greek Club and Estoril with their company. Nadia Naqib's welcoming home and warm friendship still make it a pleasure to go back to Cairo.

It is my biased belief that Middle East studies scholars are second to none in their collegiality. For their intellectual insight and encouragement, I am indebted to Margaret Litvin, Kamran Rastegar, and Jessica Winegar in particular. The Middle East Studies Association meeting has been a welcome refuge from the misconceptions about the region in the larger academic world. It was always nice not to have to explain here that the Arab world did have theater. The supportive feedback of Arabist colleagues was crucial in helping me move from a defensive stance about studying Egyptian theater to a more nuanced scholarly argument.

My shift from cultural anthropology to theater studies would not have been possible without the interdisciplinary community of the University of California, Los Angeles, program Cultures in Transnational Perspective, where I was lucky to hold a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship. Program leaders Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih were role models of intellectual openness and human generosity with sharp rigor. Theirs was the most diverse academic group I have ever been part of. Sue-Ellen Case welcomed me to the theater department and taught me a great deal about performance studies. As an affiliate of UCLA's Department of Anthropology, I also learned much at its linguistic anthropology colloquium. And my fellow Mellons were the most amazing scholars and individuals. Alessandra Di Maio, Kris Manjapra, Sarah Valentine, Sze Wei Ang, and especially Marcela Fuentes made Los Angeles a formative place and epicenter of academic cool. I am grateful to Françoise and Shu-mei for organizing reunion conferences that allowed us to meet there later in our careers.

I enjoyed a further postdoctoral fellowship at the program Europe in the Middle East—the Middle East in Europe at Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. The Theaterwissenschaft Institute at the Free University graciously hosted me at its office, where I benefited from the wisdom of Erika Fischer-Lichte, Lina Saneh, and Farah Yeganeh. Meanwhile, Georges Khalil assembled a wonderful community of Middle East scholars. Haytham Bahooora, Yasmeen Hanoosh, Nadya Sbaiti, and Kirsten Scheid were valuable interlocutors. Egyptian Berliners Ahmed Farouk, May Khairy, and Haytham al-Wardany helped me keep a virtual foothold in Cairo.

These acknowledgments should have ended here, and the book finished that year, but the Egyptian revolution changed all my plans. I was lucky that Ahmed Alaidy, Rana al-Tonsi, and Tim Wilkerson brought some of the revolutionary spirit to Doha. The best aspect of living there was the opportunity to visit Cairo regularly, through generous research funding from Northwestern University in Qatar. My sister Sumita and her husband, Steve Negus, were welcoming hosts at their home in Cairo during this time. Poetically enough, Steve had edited the *Cairo Times* issue that first made me aware of independent theater in Cairo.

My insightful colleagues at the Department of Theater Arts and Dance at the University of Minnesota encouraged me to finish this book finally, with the aid of a single-semester leave from the university. My special thanks go to Michal Kobialka for his critique of the introduction and to the students in my Performing Politics and Avant-Gardes seminars for sharing their ideas with me. Juliette Cherbuliez, Cindy Garcia, Annie Hill, and Margaret Werry formed a supportive writing group in the summer of 2016. Other UMN colleagues who have sustained me in less intellectual, but no less important, ways are Sugi Ganeshananthan, Maggie Hennefeld, Stuart McLean, Jennie Row, Sima Shakhshari, Siri Suh, and Talvin Wilks. I am grateful to them for resolving many dilemmas over cocktails. I also owe thanks to Corner Coffee and Caffetto in Uptown Minneapolis for providing inspiring writing space and good coffee.

Finally, some acknowledgments are necessary for support throughout this long journey. My parents, Manju and Vijay Pahwa, came around to understanding why I wanted to study theater in Egypt rather than going to law school, bought me a computer, and helped me out when an injury struck during dissertation writing. My sister Sumita, who visited me in Cairo in the summer of 1999, ended up doing research in Egypt too. She has offered much comparative wisdom from the field of comparative politics. My nephew Rohan and niece Mira kept me going through the slog of writing, which they enlivened with entertaining stories on FaceTime and in person. They have shown me that being an aunt is the world's best job.

A version of chapter 6 was published as “Making Revolution Everyday: Quotidian Performance and Utopian Imagination in Egypt's Streets and Squares,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2019): 56–73.

Theaters of Citizenship

Chapter 1



Theaters of Citizenship

Youth, Performance, and Identity in the Late Mubarak Era

The arcades linking downtown Cairo's boulevards were dotted with sidewalk cafés serving tea, coffee, and shisha, as well as air-conditioned bars where *muthaqqafin* (the cultured class) met to gossip about art and politics. The Grillon bar was a social institution among state television journalists and employees of the public arts sector; its bow-tie-clad bartenders dressed by the rules of an era when downtown was the center of Cairo's nightlife. Over rounds of local Stella beer and Merit cigarettes, these members of a waning intellectual elite dissected the nation's drift away from their leftist ideals. President Hosni Mubarak's economic reforms had ushered global corporations into the Egyptian economy and streamlined the state sector since the 1990s. The public cultural institutions on which an older generation had thrived no longer existed for young college graduates with artistic or literary ambitions. Now that satellite television dishes had sprouted on Cairo's buildings, reshaping the cultural landscape and throwing Egypt's prominence in the Arab world into question, these literati debated the future of national culture with particular urgency.

On an August evening in 2005, a friend and I visited the Grillon to meet playwright and director Lenin el-Ramli. The rumpled, bespectacled intellectual in his sixties shared enduring friendships and socialist ideals with state-sector peers, despite having launched a private theater company. He was currently preparing a play for the upcoming edition of the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre (CIFET), *Masks Off!*, a satire on the sudden fashion for wearing masks. This allegory of the spread of face veiling (*niqab*) in urban Egypt drove home El-Ramli's secularist cultural politics with raucous comedy. While his collaborations with Mohamed Sobhi in the 1980s and 1990s satirized feckless presidents and the decline of Arab solidarity, he now turned his critical eye to Egypt's alliance with the United States and the rise of Islamist movements.¹ Theater was his intellectual generation's means of staging debates on national identity at a time of cultural polarization. And Cairo audiences of various ages flocked to his plays.

In the alleyway off the Grillon, younger downtown *muthaqqafin* dug into bowls of fava beans at the sidewalk restaurant of Saad al-Harami. Several worked part time as freelance journalists or acting teachers; others were unemployed. Amateur theater was the topic of many of their conversations, a cherished means of sustaining student-day debates and gaining an audience for intellectual voices of a new generation. Instead of staging the plays of canonical Egyptian playwrights, these dramatists used news articles and translated texts to generate scripts for contemporary theater. One friend who had dropped out of the prestigious Theater Institute (Ma'had al-Masrah) because he found its curriculum old-fashioned spoke of devising a play based on a Paulo Coelho book, with Indian music to accompany the spiritual theme. Cairo dramatists in their twenties and thirties shared with El-Ramli's generation an enthusiasm for theater as a stage for national identity politics and a means of self-representation. But they played the role of public intellectuals through adaptation, hybridization, and improvisation more than authorship. Their version of avant-garde culture traversed genre and national boundaries.

This book analyzes the evolving use of urban theater as a stage for citizenship during the decline and fall of the Mubarak regime. When the former president's minister of culture trimmed the budgets of state theaters, diverting millions toward an annual international theater festival, young Egyptian dramatists took to seeking space outside state institutions to make critical theater. These university graduates from urban families found in the venerable art a public forum in which to represent their generational concerns intellectually and aesthetically, if not politically. Wherever theater was performed, it created a platform for modern identity politics that echoed that of the storied theaters of Egypt's heritage. Middle-class creatives who struggled to find work in an increasingly globalized private cultural sector that favored a tiny, bilingual elite found in amateur theater a place to pursue many ambitions. Throughout the shifting economic tides produced by globalization policies in the early 2000s, and waves of political repression, they invested their time and resources in building a milieu for youth culture to call their own. Independent theater became a lively stage of citizenship, gathering waves of generational representation of Egyptian identity.

Among the policies of neoliberal globalization in what I call the late Mubarak era (2001–11), one that affected youth sharply was the reduction of state subsidies for public universities and cultural centers. As with the structural adjustment programs that had handed economic power to foreign corporations in Egypt, the shrinking of state cultural institutions proved most detrimental to the middle class.² The state sector had traditionally employed journalists, television producers, and artists, making culture a respectable career for college graduates. However, my friends ensconced in downtown Cairo's cafés lacked such avenues for employment and social influence. Their generation experienced a growing cultural and economic distance from the

aging ranks of established, state-employed intellectuals. Most dramatists under forty thus affiliated themselves with the independent arts movements that some of their seniors dismissed as amateur. The new generation styled its distance from state institutions as a mode of freedom, however, claiming its underground as a space of independent thought, like the informal spaces Stefano Harney and Fred Moten call “the undercommons of enlightenment.”³ They capitalized on a fashion for transnational theater in an era of globalization to claim the mantle of Egyptian avant-gardists of the future. These “youth of the theater” (*shabab al-masrah*) used the double sense of the word “youth” (in Arabic as in English) to signal the rejuvenation of Egyptian theater. Their relative optimism about the future of national culture in the era of globalization reasserted the role of theater as a stage not just for intellectual debate but also for the reconceptualization of the avant-garde as a popular, inclusive cultural space.

The idealistic cultural workers who launched independent theater in Egypt, through activist campaigns in 1990 and 2005, were part of a wider movement of underground organizing that generated the 2011 revolution. As Egyptians who came of age in the Mubarak era demanded cultural and political rights from state institutions, they demonstrated the force of alternative representational practices when formal politics was stifled by dictatorship. Thus, the performances and activism developed in independent theater of the late Mubarak era built repertoires of citizenship. As independent dramatists developed contemporary, critical narratives of middle-class identity, they also practiced collaborating, debating, and organizing cultural production. Their collaborations evolved into repertoires that sustained concepts of citizenship in the undercommons of a neoliberal oligarchy. Cultural production had a relatively wide margin of freedom under Mubarak, as was the case with his predecessors in Egypt who protected artists and dramatists from excesses of state violence. The policy of cultural democracy, launched in the 1990s, specifically designated the arts as a site of liberal secular expression.⁴ Television dramas and literary novels were consequently critical sites of debate on national culture and social class in Egypt’s era of globalization.⁵ Independent arts movements in the decade before the revolution further opened up the space of cultural debate, turning a closed intellectual landscape into a proliferating web of venues for cultural democracy. They generated new platforms for expression that allowed institutionalized modernist ideology to branch out into diverse politics of citizenship. Analyzing the cultural politics of independent performance repertoires offers insights into the ways in which participatory citizenship was rehearsed on the eve of Egypt’s revolution, and enacted in its aftermath.

Egyptian Theater and Identity Politics in the Twentieth Century

Egypt was unchallenged as the leading Arab producer of film, television, and music throughout the twentieth century. Its official national dialect spread through the Arab world via broadcast, in radio concerts by Umm Kulthum, the cinema of Youssef Chahine, and television versions of stage plays like the 1970s *Madrasat al-mushaghghabin* (*School for Troublemakers*), still on reruns in the 1990s.⁶ For many contemporary Cairenes, the golden age of Egyptian theater was that in which movie stars Adel Imam and Ahmad Zaki had gotten their breaks. “Do you know that Adel Imam is in a play on Haram Street right now?” many a helpful Cairo taxi driver asked when I mentioned I was researching theater in 2004. As proud as many Cairenes were of their television and cinema, theater elicited a special nostalgia. Whether my interlocutors had acted in university festivals or watched stage comedies on television, they spoke of theater as an art of uncensored satire and youthful irreverence. It was a place where director Mohamed Sobhi could satirize President Mubarak’s fake referendum with two different words for “yes” in his 1999 musical *Carmen*, and youth could make fun of teachers in *School for Troublemakers*. The historical shifts within Egyptian theater made it both a school for national identity and a space in which to critique its authoritative conception.

After 1919, when Egypt rose in revolution against British occupation and Ottoman rule, cosmopolitan intellectuals began promoting theater as a means of fostering modern thought. Pioneering playwright Muhammad Taymur advocated for national theater with the argument that this cultural form was a mark of a modern, European-style society.⁷ Until this time, theater in Egypt had mainly been the province of traveling Syrian troupes who adapted French and Italian stories, with exceptions such as Egyptian Jewish playwright Yaqub Sanu’, whose satires at Cairo’s Comédie Française theater ran afoul of the Ottoman khedive.⁸ Egyptian playwrights before the Second World War largely continued this tradition of comedy and farce, despite the efforts of Taymur and French-educated Tawfiq al-Hakim to lift theater above light entertainment. Songs were a key attraction in plays, and actors were renowned primarily as singers and dancers.⁹ After the war, the liberal Wafdist government promoted theater for education more systematically. It was taught in the national network of amateur cultural centers called the People’s University (established in 1945), where classes in art, theater, and literary writing supplemented school curricula with aesthetic repertoires of cosmopolitan identity. The years after the 1952 revolution marked a high point of state support for theater, as President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s regime funneled public money into building new theaters in Cairo, including the Tali’a (Avant-Garde), near the National Theater (formerly the Comédie Française), and Al-Salam Theater for the new Comedy and Modern Theater troupes.

Leading playwrights of the Nasser era, such as Yusuf Idris and Al-Hakim, published widely read polemics that questioned the politics of staging

European-style theater in a postcolonial nation. Their arguments for theater that suited Egypt's "theatrical mold" and drew on folk characters were influential in evolving definitions of modern national culture that extended beyond the cosmopolitan urban class that older liberals addressed.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the regime sponsored budding playwrights and directors on study-abroad programs in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.¹¹ The combination of vigorous debates about and major state funding for theater led to a vibrant and critical "theater of the sixties" (*masrah al-sittiniyat*) that intellectuals like El-Ramli continued to lionize. When private theaters were legalized again in the 1970s, that golden age was used to stand for a project of national unity, pan-Arabism, and socialism, across its varied genres and forms. However, it had been a crucial means of contesting state policy as well as supporting its leftist principles.

Fans of irreverent comedy and literary drama alike valued theater as a venue for sociopolitical critique. Like their Syrian counterparts, Egyptian playwrights of the late twentieth century capitalized on the protection afforded to the arts to hold the state and its leaders to account. The language of theater was often high Arabic (*fusha*), and the double valence of *al-adab* as "literature" and "politesse" in Arabic granted critical drama a courtly stature.¹² Literary writers across the Arab world channeled its cultural respectability to criticize authorities. Lisa Wedeen writes of a rich visual and verbal repertoire in Syria under Hafez al-Assad that framed the ruling family as a corrupt patriarchy. It included jokes, literature, and particularly theater.¹³ The comparable use of political allegory in Nasser's Egypt staged the revered president as a misguided protagonist who needed guidance from ethical intellectuals, represented often by a Hamlet figure.¹⁴ If theater was a space of cultural exception to the sustained emergency of democracy in Syria, it served a comparable function under successive Egyptian dictators.¹⁵ When more comic styles of drama blossomed with the reemergence of private theaters in the 1970s, playwrights continued to invoke literary tradition to authorize their political critiques. For instance, Ali Salem's 1970 *Comedy of Oedipus: You Killed the Beast* turned the Greek drama into a satire of Nasser's policies, setting the stage for Salem's earthier *School for Troublemakers*.

Critical drama on Egypt's main stages fell into decline in the Mubarak era, when state support for playwriting diminished. Moreover, the regime's expanding economic power proved difficult to represent in traditional drama. When Cairo's National Theater staged *King Lear* in 2001 and *Hamlet* in 2003, it produced costume dramas in ornate Arabic that left all the major critics unimpressed. They denounced the use of big budgets to stage classic plays that failed to resonate with current social or political concerns.¹⁶ After all, charismatic Arab presidents who were once represented as kings had been replaced by technocrats. Thus, Syria's Bashar al-Assad was represented as a sadistic puppet in the show *Top Goon* and his violence played for dark laughs.¹⁷ Egypt's Mubarak did not even appear as a dramatic character; his

regime's power was visible instead in capillary intrusions into citizens' lives. My theater friends in the early 2000s consequently found the Egyptian canon of political drama unsatisfying for their purposes. "How did the political theater of the sixties change anything?" one actor-director asked rhetorically. These new-generation dramatists recognized that Egyptian theater's status as a stage for national debate had diminished in the age of television. One advantage of theater's lower new profile, however, was that it was minimally censored by state authorities.¹⁸ Independent theater, in particular, could stage more daring narratives than television dramas.

Independent theater in the late Mubarak era was critical rather than directly political, addressing a mode of neoliberal state power that "manifested in multiple, often contradictory strategies that encounter diverse claims and contestations, and produce diverse and contingent outcomes."¹⁹ The Ministry of Culture invited troupes to participate in its theater festivals and offered opportunities at state theaters on an ad hoc basis. Meanwhile, state security regularly shut down independent plays about which informers had complained. Theater makers began self-regulating their work, developing strategies in response to the uneven exercise of power. Their strategies exemplified what Gilles Deleuze calls the society of control, in which subjects modulate their relationships to power.²⁰ Adjusting the nationalist tone of political theater in earlier decades, contemporary dramatists now spoke back to state pedagogy in alternative performances of citizenship that centered on gender and generational identity. Not only did they largely reject the literary respectability of the older generation, then, but they also turned aesthetic dissent into new avant-garde style. Neoliberal state policies combined with a history of intellectual critique in theater to shape an independent theater that set new cultural standards. It spoke of individual citizens and their desires rather than of masses awaiting enlightenment. While claiming the mantle of critical intellectuals, then, independents were also proud outcasts of cultural institutions and their approved narratives of identity.²¹

The iconoclastic politics of identity in independent theater scrambled the cultural genres of state theaters, each assigned to produce plays for a segment of the citizenry. As "the theater of established authors" (*masrah al-rasikhin*), the National Theater addressed educated audiences with high-toned drama. Tragedy was a signature of its program, which typically consisted of one translated play in literary Arabic and one in Egyptian Arabic each year. Colloquial musical comedies and romantic melodramas formed the mainstay of Cairo's Al-Salam Theater, by contrast. In 2004, veteran playwright Alfred Farag's *Gawaz 'ala waraqit al-talaq* (*Marriage on a Divorce Paper*) revived Nasserist nostalgia with its staging of a doomed love affair between a young aristocrat and the daughter of his chauffeur. There were few such national heroes in independent theater, with its marginalized young men (see chapter 3). Their performance of the role of ethical citizen was more tenuous, as they struggled to reconcile national ideals with oppressive realities. Independent

dramatists challenged the progressive symbolism of middle-class protagonists in mainstream theater by showing how that social class had been eroded morally and materially.

Even intellectuals of an older generation recognized that the old avant-garde dramatic genres no longer worked in a new era. They applauded Minister of Culture Farouk Hosni for taking the initiative to reimagine Egyptian theater when he founded CIFET in 1988. Aimed at bringing Egyptian theater into conversation with global trends, the festival also relieved avant-gardists of a tradition of representing the nation positively. New experimental theater would focus on diverse stories and attend to form as well as content. The influence of CIFET enriched Egyptian repertoires of proscenium naturalism with dance theater, storytelling, and other styles fashionable at transnational festivals. The festival certainly raised debate on how such transnational exchange might threaten the cultural specificity of Egyptian theater, at academic seminars and in the pages of literary journals.²² Given the nationalist commitments of state theaters, it was unsurprising that new styles and genres seen at CIFET had the most visible impact on independent theater. Younger dramatists seized the opportunity to mediate their stories through texts and techniques outside the Egyptian literary canon. Their embrace of new performance styles gave their repertoires a cosmopolitan cachet, echoing the authoritative language that literary predecessors had claimed for their own critical theater.

New embodiments of the citizen in independent theater resembled the Europeanized liberal aesthetics of Egypt's historical avant-garde. In many ways, independent theater was an extension of the twentieth-century state cultural project of fashioning modern identity through artistic self-representation. However, staging neoliberal politics of personhood engendered subtle differences from the performance repertoires of classical modernism.²³ A key difference of theater in the neoliberal context was that it relied on more varied arbiters of value than just the state cultural establishment. As such, its repertoires aligned with different institutional values. If the Ministry of Culture or Cultural Development Fund was unable to help a troupe, the troupe could appeal to a foreign cultural center (see chapter 2) or private teaching institution (see chapter 5). Since building cultural alliances was a multipronged endeavor for an independent troupe, these troupes assembled flexible repertoires of genre and character. These evolved as the troupes' performance venues changed, and the sprawling independent movement itself evolved considerably during the decade of my study. The exuberant cosmopolitanism that led some critics to question independent theater as a new *national* avant-garde indexed shifting politics of citizenship during these turbulent years in Egypt. While the aesthetics of citizenship in golden-age theater centered on iconic national figures, independent theater staged the gender and class politics of neoliberal identity.

It is in this sense that independent theater of the late Mubarak era was a theater of neoliberal citizenship, responding to the erasure of popular voice

in economic and political institutions with self-styled representational practices. In an era of international arts festivals, satellite television, economic globalization, and military dictatorship, the nation and the stage were no longer metonymic spaces. State theaters could not claim to represent the iconic citizen. Yet avant-garde performance repertoires did enrich the means of narrating contemporary crises of citizenship. In particular, the shift in independent theater away from text-based dramatic literature opened up scenarios of alienation and narratives of stasis rather than progress. New theater staged gender and class anxiety through experimental repertoires for embodying fractured selves. In the plays, theater workshops, and activist campaigns of independent theater, young characters embodied living critiques of a nation that left them without a future.

Narrating Youth and the National Future

The hero of many a classic Egyptian drama was a young student, son, or lover whose story was also that of the modernizing nation. In the theater of the early 2000s, these protagonists were often alienated youth. Dancer-choreographer Muhammad Shafiq's 2004 dance theater show *Aqulu lakum (I Say to You)* had ten performers onstage, nine of them men, occupying separate spaces to voice fragments of poetry, play a guitar, or eat watermelon. The visually striking performance devised for CIFET staged what Shafiq considered a key truth about his generation: "99% of Egyptian youth don't know what to do. They are torn apart [*mushattatin*]." ²⁴ The circular narrative of the performance marked the repetitive experience of time for many unemployed graduates who participated in independent theater. There was no grand, modernist coming-of-age; narratives were built instead through smaller movements of bodies and shifts in their relations. Performance repertoires in independent theater evolved in tandem with generational conceptions of identity to stage the experience of being young in a time without hope.

Youth had been icons of a progressive Egyptian modernity since the interwar period, when they represented cosmopolitan middle-class (*effendi*) culture in sports media and photography. ²⁵ In the post-1990s wave of globalization, they were hailed as cosmopolitan consumers of new media and consumer goods. ²⁶ The young men who swaggered through downtown Cairo on Friday evenings, with trendy hair and tight jeans, consciously played the role of modern youth inherited from Egypt's cinematic and musical heritage. In the late Mubarak era, however, being young and urban, even college educated, held little promise of attaining full citizenship. The academic and bureaucratic institutions that had channeled upward mobility were eroded by structural adjustment reforms, and only exclusive private schools could now guarantee their graduates economic independence. Young models seen in Egyptian advertisements for glitzy holidays and television talent contests

were visibly upper class. For the Mubarak regime, a bright national future was represented by the president's son and heir-apparent, Gamal, whose smiling face began appearing on television and giant billboards in Cairo. The gaping difference between iconographies of youth for members of the business elite, on the one hand, and the reality of struggle for most urban youth, on the other, fueled an underground youth culture. Independent theater became one creative space for middle-class Egyptians in search of an aesthetic vocabulary to replace a lost iconography of youthful hope and desire.

In the early twenty-first century, when the median Egyptian population was under thirty-five years old,²⁷ youth moved at different speeds through life and urban space. A middle-class Cairo man in his twenties, like my friend Khaled, typically lived with his parents in a modest suburb like Al-Haram or Helwan. Khaled had a public university degree and worked several freelance jobs, saving a little money in the hope of marrying and renting his own apartment. The world of theater offered a space of community and cultural capital while his search for permanent employment dragged on. Between appointments in central Cairo, he caught up with university friends at downtown cafés, where they discussed creative projects and kept youthful dreams alive. Their plays about the temporality of everyday despair paradoxically helped these young artists think of a future in which they could lead more respectable lives. Most of the youth who talked theater at such cafés were men. The few young women free to socialize here were children of artists and intellectuals, journalists on the beat, or foreign residents of downtown like me. We inhabited a bohemian world in which youth stretched beyond student years and slow journeys to adulthood were the norm. A daring few even conducted love affairs in downtown *pieds-à-terre*. Their unconventional lifestyles attracted criticism from many elders who worried about unemployment among educated youth. Senior dramatist Saleh Saad, whose teenage daughter was part of this crowd, once organized a play because he was concerned about youth wasting their time at cafés. Theater work gave structure and narrative to slow lives.

In performance, young creatives were able to situate their unconventional lives within a history of avant-garde youth culture. Like José Esteban Muñoz's queer performers, alienated from mainstream theater, these artists constructed minor narratives that "offer[ed] the minoritarian subject a space to situate itself in history and thus seize social agency."²⁸ Muñoz's concept of disidentification, an alternative to the binary of good and bad subjects, resonates with the work of young Egyptian theater makers who turned the negative associations of unemployed leisure into time for art. Rather than being sexual rebels or drug users, they used theater to enact an alternative respectability. They played the role of new-generation intellectuals by debating at downtown cafés, where they sometimes joined the weekly gatherings (*nadwas*) of senior intellectuals. At the same time, they questioned the very institutions of Cairo's intellectual life, as they formed a fugitive community

seeking to remake the system rather than reproduce its concepts of professionalism.²⁹ The combination of utopian idealism and nihilistic anger that fueled the independent theater scene permeated its narratives of youth who made visible the failures of their society.

Across the stages of youth theater festivals, the alienated young man was a familiar dramatic character. At the Sakia cultural center's 2004 theater festival, the Panorama troupe staged an allegorical chess game between an older and a younger man, the latter condemned to defeat by unfair rules. Young dramatists mined Egyptian dramatic literature for texts about shell-shocked soldiers and disgruntled youth, or constructed collages of translated texts to tell a contemporary story. In the language and aesthetics of drama, their generational predicament could be represented with intellectual refinement. Whether independent dramatists devised their own scripts or borrowed from foreign literatures, they performed a gesture of rejecting the classic texts of Egyptian drama. The canonical repertoire offered few scenarios that represented life in this generation. Independent dramatists' disidentificatory practice of "rethinking and recycling encoded meaning" by adapting cultural texts gave middle-class youth a larger repertoire of scenarios for self-representation.³⁰ They won considerable critical recognition for their new styles of theater, in an era when mass media claimed more representational authority than live performance. Their minoritarian representational practices fit the predicament of theater itself, as it was pushed to the margins of cultural life. At the same time, these practices—which Muñoz terms utopian gestures—staged the social future as if it could be transformed through youthful interventions. Independent theater was itself such an intervention, one that contested representations of youth in mass media by showing what more representative narratives looked like.

Turning youth from a stage in the life cycle to the stage of theater, where it built cultural repertoires, transposed a temporary identity into one with its own space.³¹ As a cherished part of youth culture, amateur theater was meant to be just a stage in the lives of educated Egyptians. University students who wrote satirical dramas had once graduated, gone on to work in media, and looked back fondly on their days in theater. Now, graduates who dwelt longer in the time between college and employment brought collaborative student-day practices to independent troupes, fostering more inclusive and equitable spaces of theatrical production. Youth who restricted their unconventional personal lives to the corners of downtown Cairo and Alexandria could go to independent performances and see these represented as legitimate culture onstage. Independent theater repurposed generational alienation and cultural conflict into positive identities, building narratives of the national future out of youthful frustration, hope, and desire.

Independent theater troupes built an extensive network of youth culture in the late Mubarak era. As youth was reconceptualized within independent theater, its dramatic scenarios came to legitimize what had been underground

cultural politics. In Diana Taylor's seminal theory of repertoire, reenacted performance scenarios carry cultural memory forward in time. Through techniques of "cultural masquerading and strategic repositioning," contemporary performances invoke historical scenarios to claim a link to authoritative sources.³² Independent Egyptian dramatists mobilized the authenticating relationship between contemporary theatrical scenes and historical scenarios of youth in both directions. They used the historical respectability of theater as a space of youthful critique to win recognition for their stories, and their experiences to infuse scenarios of youth culture with contemporary detail. By recycling dramatic repertoires from home and abroad, they showed how far Egyptian youth culture had diverged from its representation in canonical modernist theater. The scenes of cosmopolitan youth represented in this theater countered globalization from above through undercommons repertoires that showed new-generation intellectuals to be adept at producing modern culture despite their exclusion from cultural institutions. Their repertoires carried not just representations of modern youth, but also alternative narratives and symbols of citizenship that resonated with many Egyptians.

Intellectual Labor and Cultural Movements in the Neoliberal Era

Underground political and cultural movements made their activist potential felt during a time of heightened popular discontent in the late Mubarak era. In April 2008, a protest wave against ongoing economic reforms brought dissident movements briefly into the national spotlight. The April 6 movement, organized by striking textile factory workers in Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra and aided by Cairo-based youth activists, drew swift repression by the regime's Central Security Forces. It was nevertheless a sign that the Mubarak regime was losing credibility. The protest against disinvestment in a flagship public-sector factory made spectacularly visible the discontents of privatization across class lines. Meanwhile, Egypt's political leadership ignored emerging networks of grassroots organizing. It worked to win ideological support instead, through policies that included investing in cultural production. After the international arts festivals launched in the 1990s, it was the turn of the General Organization of Cultural Palaces (Al-Hay'ah al-'Amma li Qusur al-Thaqafa) to get a boost in state funding, aimed at rejuvenating youthful interest in the arts in Egypt's provinces. Jessica Winegar describes this as an enlightenment program to cultivate faith in the secular-oriented nationalism of the regime.³³ By investing in culture rather than industry, the Mubarak regime sought loyalty from an educated middle class that was assumed to embrace its secular liberal values. Egypt's culture wars of the 1990s, in which the Ministry of Culture claimed to defend literati against their Islamist critics, urged state intellectuals to focus on ideological rather than economic concerns.³⁴

Using the cultural field to claim legitimacy was a risky project in an era when the state offered little funding to cultural producers.³⁵ Annual theater festivals and national culture conferences in the late Mubarak era framed intellectual life mainly as a life of the mind. Thus, the new head of the General Organization of Cultural Palaces could announce his mission in 2007 as simply “return[ing] our attention to the intellectual” as a means of “spreading human knowledge [*ma'rifa insaniyya*], and absorbing what is new in culture and in life.”³⁶ The organization that had built brick-and-mortar cultural centers in all of Egypt's towns and cities now hosted conferences in Cairo and circulated “human knowledge” in an immaterial, informational mode. According to the editor of the new General Organization of Cultural Palaces newspaper *Masrahuna*, the idea was to build arts culture as a counterpoint “to religious groups and that sort of thing.” Inevitably, this civilizing mission faltered when it relied on ideology rather than material support to persuade literati that the regime was their patron. In 2003, novelist Sonallah Ibrahim famously rejected a state literary prize by saying the regime lacked the legitimacy to award it. “We have no theater, no cinema, no research, no education. We only have festivals and conferences and a boxful of lies,” he declared at the award ceremony.³⁷

The emphasis on ideology over production in regime cultural policy also frustrated young artists and writers. Nevertheless, they made the best of it by incorporating knowledge gleaned from festivals and seminars into their own cultural practice. The transposition of official knowledge into alternative cultural production was a signature of intellectual networks in the late Mubarak era. While the regime celebrated intellectual life in the abstract, independent dramatists used the cultural prestige of theater to win credit for their critical productions. Their self-styled repertoires for organizing troupes and mounting performances generated what philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato calls immaterial labor. “Immaterial labor produces first and foremost a ‘social relationship’ (a relationship of innovation, production, and consumption),” Lazzarato argues, showing that the information society has extended a style of intellectual labor once associated with cultural elites to ordinary culture workers.³⁸ Independent Egyptian dramatists occupied a space between cultural elites and participating subjects of the information economy. They absorbed cultural knowledge and used it to play the role of savvy cosmopolitan intellectuals at transnational and Egyptian theater festivals alike. This role had political potential in a nation that historically placed intellectuals at the forefront of projects of building national identity.

Repertoires of cultural citizenship formed in the heyday of socialist nationalism, and developed over the following decades, showed the double-edged nature of intellectual support for state ideology. It could be used as an antagonistic weapon, as Ibrahim demonstrated, or an arsenal of alternative cultural authority. New-generation dramatists often used their intellectual stature for the latter purpose, deploying the iconic figure of youth toward

a new narrative of cultural citizenship.³⁹ The contemporary national cultural economy, shaped by liberalization, strategically absorbed the labor of independent dramatists into grand state spectacles like CIFET. Independent dramatists also parlayed the recognition they gained here, however, to win material rewards and build their own cultural capital. Those who learned to pitch their plays to and win production money from state officials used the same skills to negotiate with private cultural centers. And they brandished credentials built at CIFET and elsewhere to demand legal rights from the Ministry of Culture. The place of theater within the neoliberal state culture project was more flexible than the regime had outlined with its abstract model of globalizing culture through dissemination from state institutions to the masses. Young dramatists with cosmopolitan cultural capital used their immaterial labor in ways that did not always fit within official definitions of cultural production. In fact, they demonstrated that they could take their cultural skills elsewhere—even to private corporations or nongovernmental organizations that were challenging state control over the meaning of national culture.

The uneven and ideologically complex landscape of cultural production in the late Mubarak era resonated with the Black American intellectual culture that Harney and Moten situate on the cusp of official recognition and countercultural fugitivity. Fugitive intellectuals who redirected their labor outside institutions that excluded them developed alternative repertoires that governments sought to co-opt with only partial success.⁴⁰ Their Egyptian counterparts spent long years building such repertoires, as we will see in the chapters that follow. However, the politics of their practice were not always radical. The various performance repertoires that emerged in independent theater networks—from politically critical theater to self-help programs—borrowed conceptions of culture from the institutions from which they had escaped. Their respective reconstructions of cultural citizenship in the undercommons exemplified the flexible paths of intellectual labor under a neoliberal regime that invested in individuals more than institutions. Independent dramatists were intellectually radical, then, in using state ideology about enlightenment against the state, as they showed how differently one could enact enlightened citizenship.

The role of the cultured citizen became a reservoir for the hopes of middle-class Cairo youth, while their economic future was uncertain. The chapters that follow show that their performance practice generated a cultural undercommons that spilled beyond a single political orientation. It would thus be a mistake to frame independent theater in unified terms, as the extension of a state secularist tradition or logical precursor to the 2011 revolution. However, these dramatists did share utopian visions of changing the future through cultural practice in the present. A faith in intellectual agency echoed across the cultural repertoires of performers who acted, negotiated, and wrote against the constraints of life in an oligarchic dictatorship. They continued to make

pragmatic compromises, such as taking on dull teaching jobs and negotiating with corrupt state officials. Their undercommons culture nevertheless kept alive their intellectual idealism. Where state ideology framed theater as a site for rehearsing limited modes of cultural citizenship, independent theater extended it to broader imaginations of worldmaking. Its aesthetic and political values were part of an undercommons of Egyptian neoliberalism that lent its utopian spirit to the revolutionary project.

Performing Revolutionary Citizenship

During the mass uprising that ended the Mubarak era, and the protest waves that followed, various repertoires of citizenship were on public display. Praying Muslims and Christians, guitarists belting protest songs, and middle-class youth forming security details in Tahrir Square performed ethical citizenship according to each of their conceptualizations of a revolutionary society. In 2013, protests by secularist literati against the Muslim Brotherhood's minister of culture similarly staged citizenship by cultural means. A sit-in at Cairo's Ministry of Culture headquarters featured the highbrow genres of ballet and opera, from which the new regime threatened to withdraw funding. In Alexandria, it was independent dramatists who organized the parallel protest, inviting a female poet, a male lute player, and local indie band Massar Egbari to perform in their Festival of Dissent (Mahragan al-Rafd), while campaigners for the Tamarod movement gathered signatures. Urban Egypt's mainstream and underground cultural producers intersected in the festive protests, where they performed confident, postrevolutionary claims to public voice.

A generational difference between performances of cultural citizenship was clear in the contrast between Cairo's and Alexandria's protests. The senior state functionaries' call to safeguard a hierarchy of arts overlapped minimally with independent dramatists' performance against "all forms of dictatorship," as Massar Egbari's lead singer put it. The culture that the younger independents sought to protect from political repression encompassed lifestyles, political critique, and repertoires of self-representation, which could not be contained in an elite institution like the opera. Claiming recognition for cultural diversity in the anthropological sense was a key concern for new-generation dramatists. Their use of theater to link their pre- and postrevolution visions of cultural citizenship showed an enduring refusal to be incorporated within official political projects. Instead of reconciling with the Ministry of Culture after the revolution, then, independent dramatists organized with other independent artists to form a coalition that reimaged the future of cultural production. Revolutionary cultural practice did not end after the political revolution.

The persistence of hope after the political failure of the Egyptian revolution has been the subject of much debate. Samuli Schielke's sensitive ethnography

of the different hopes that sustained middle-class young Egyptians before and after this epoch offers a nuanced picture of what it meant to have an “aspirational sense of existence, a life in the future tense.”⁴¹ To analyze the aspirations of independent dramatists across countercultural and avowedly neoliberal repertoires, I build on his insight that utopian thinking in this generation spanned ideological divides. Since dramatists’ utopian practices were in the here and now, however, I frame their hopes in everyday terms rather than grand narratives of life building. Muñoz’s concept of “doing utopia” as a practice of unlinking life from the pragmatism of the present in order to see a future is a useful frame for aspirational narratives in independent theater.⁴² The new-generation dramatists who were my friends were not rehearsing for roles waiting for them on reaching adulthood. They were rather using performance to embody new futures in concrete utopias. Their cultural practice held in reserve alternative narratives of the future, structurally separated as it was from the political world, where disappointment soon grew as revolutionary hopes were quashed.

The hopeful projects of the plays, activist manifestos, and self-help workshops that I analyze in this book carried more modest dreams of social change than the spectacular protests of the revolution. They enacted a new imagination of the future through concrete and conscious shifts in performances of citizenship. The dialogue between avant-garde performance and imaginations of new citizenship in the late Mubarak era played out in embodiments of time, personhood, and social relation in performance repertoires. Since theater was a key site of social experiment and intellectual practice among educated Egyptians in their twenties and thirties, it generated many such repertoires, with socially radical as well as economically liberal narratives of the future. Examining the respective paths of these projects reveals ways in which utopian experiments gained recognition as part of the new national culture. They also offer historical context in which to situate the limited progress of the grand revolutionary narrative beyond the eighteen-day uprising.

Youth culture is frequently a suggestive vector of social and political change. In Egypt, notes sociologist Asef Bayat, its political implications were subtle but significant. Formal youth movements were intermittent in the late Mubarak era, since organized dissent was heavily policed. He argues instead for attending to youth cultural *nonmovements*: “the collective actions of non-collective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations.”⁴³ These passive social networks turned into dynamic collectives at moments of crisis. The story of independent theater is one example of a nonmovement that united occasionally to form an activist front, with the aim of gaining cultural or political rights. In time, the avant-garde of the 1990 manifesto devolved into a sprawling and sometimes contradictory cultural phenomenon. While its institutional alliances shifted,

independent theater remained part of a broader cultural space for youth to experiment with social and intellectual roles. Using the concept of performance repertoire to link onstage and offstage activities, I extend Bayat's analysis of explicitly activist and everyday movements by studying their coevolution in independent theater as an undercommons of official culture and politics.

The theatrical repertoires that I analyze include performances of citizenship in an avant-garde manifesto movement (chapter 2) and dramatic narratives about gender and generational identity (chapters 3 and 4). Independent theater accommodated self-representations in which such aspirational performances of citizenship could be enacted in halls of power. As theater offered a space for those excluded from institutions to act as legitimate intellectuals, independent dramatists gained cultural if not legal recognition from the highest authorities. They capitalized on the historical status of theater as a national avant-garde to invoke recognition for more minor narratives of citizenship. The use of theater to publicize youth cultural knowledge was a tactic used also in explicitly neoliberal institutions. Self-help programs in the new cultural centers of the late Mubarak era employed actors' skills to channel embodied knowledge from the neoliberal workplace into educational settings (see chapter 5). As the immaterial labor of avant-garde performers was transposed and repurposed in new repertoires of citizenship, theater culture generated circuits for distributing cultural capital across class lines. Such attempts to extend cultural production and its means of self-representation outside a middle-class urban milieu proliferated in street festivals and performances after 2011 (see chapter 6).

The repertoires of citizenship that Egyptian theater makers developed before and after the revolution used the regime of cultural rights under Mubarak to gesture at expanding the sphere of democracy further. Independent dramatists were privileged subalterns, able to use culture to call for transformation and be heard. Their aesthetic and organizational practices formed a concrete template for democratic representation, cutting across inherited class- and gender-based norms of political leadership. The rights-bearing citizen delineated in liberal Egyptian political culture throughout the twentieth century had long been represented dramatically, in television, cinema, and theater. Independent intellectuals opened up space to imagine a future in which a wider range of Egyptians had access to aesthetic and political self-representation. Their use of cultural practice toward constructive worldmaking resonated with contemporary political projects to reclaim the national future as a site of hope.

Chapter 2



After the Festival

The Intertwined Rise of Cultural and Political Avant-Gardes

Autumn brought a harvest of new plays to theaters across Cairo. Each September, the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre (CIFET) saw state-owned theaters spruced up to welcome about forty foreign troupes, as well as critics and academics from across the world. For ten days, the gated Cairo Opera House campus buzzed with crowds of theatergoers in their twenties. They chatted and flirted in cafés before the show, spilling onto manicured strips of lawn or the spacious parking lot. These middle-class audiences had arrived by metro or bus and were easily distinguished from elite operagoers by their curly ponytails or the chic Muslim headscarves popular among young women. Foreign artists who came as guests of Egypt's Ministry of Culture were impressed by the large audiences for experimental theater in Cairo. The festival was a carefully curated window onto cosmopolitan theater culture, part of the Mubarak regime's efforts to showcase cultural liberalism in Egypt. Without allowing political democracy, the regime claimed instead to preserve a diversity of cultural voices against Islamist hegemony. CIFET was a key showcase for its policy of cultural democracy. A range of Egyptian troupes were welcomed to perform, regardless of institutional affiliation, and the nation's most diverse panoply of theater was represented to international festival audiences.

Minister of Culture Farouk Hosni's mission statement in the brochure for the inaugural CIFET, in 1988, proclaimed his goal of liberalizing cultural production in Egypt. "The idea of the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre emerged from my faith that creative expression in all its forms finds a surprising vibrancy in the moment of crossing from one society to another."¹ Hosni was careful to emphasize that this initiative would also serve national audiences, enriching Egyptian culture and creativity. The festival's committee included a translation wing that rendered foreign scholarly works and plays into Arabic, and the committee responded to charges of cultural imperialism from nationalist intellectuals by ensuring a strong

representation of Arab troupes. “The festival management hopes that the national identity of art will not be substituted by continuous dialogue with experimental currents in world arts,” the inaugural program stated.² After much careful framing, and due deference to members of the state cultural establishment, CIFET gained legitimacy as a beloved annual institution for Cairo dramatists.

Most Egyptian theater makers I encountered at the festival ignored the painstaking brochures and seminars and went straight to the performances. Even the sleepest state theaters saw long lines at ticket windows during the festival, when they hosted plays by foreign troupes. Hungry audiences packed in to British Kuwaiti Sulayman al-Bassam’s *Al-Hamlet Summit*, an Italian *Biancaneve* with a mix of puppets and humans, and a Korean shaman-style performance. These formally inventive shows were unlike the typically slow-paced literary dramas at Cairo’s state theaters, which hewed to Egyptian realism and historical European repertoires. CIFET revived interest in theater as a space of contemporary creative possibility among different generations of Egyptian aficionados who had mourned its stagnation in recent years. They wrote long columns that debated the festival’s merits in the magazine *Al-Masrah (Theater)* and in special issues of literary journals.³ Some asked skeptically whether the festival was an appropriate use of state funds, noting that five-star hotel accommodations for visiting troupes came at the cost of funding cash-strapped theaters nationally. For the independent dramatists I knew, however, the festival was a priceless opportunity to learn about theater beyond the limited vista offered by Egyptian state institutions. Retired playwright Alfred Farag’s prediction that CIFET would appeal most to a young generation of theater makers was proved right.⁴

Young theater makers embraced the minister’s vision that the festival would enrich national theater. The experimental styles seen at CIFET were folded into the repertoires of independent dramatists in their twenties and thirties who eventually came to represent Egypt in the festival competition. In 2003, the dance-drama *Aqni’a, aqmisha, w masa’ir (Masks, Fabrics, and Destinies)* by the independent troupe Al-Shadhya w al-Iqtirab (Shrapnel) not only won the committee’s sponsorship as Egypt’s official entry to the festival but also took the prize for best ensemble performance. The show was a pioneering collaboration between independent dramatists and a new state theater, the Hanager, which invited Iraqi director Qasim Muhammad to script the play. Directed by the Shrapnel troupe’s Hany El-Metennawy, the experimental show combined fragments of Greek myths and ritualized dance to stage an elegy for Iraq, which had been crushed by war. This prize fruit of the international festival garnered attention from local and international television crews in Egypt. *Masks, Fabrics, and Destinies* was invited to theater festivals in Indonesia and Italy. Hosni held a celebratory reception for the large ensemble cast of dancers and actors and promised to support their travel abroad. But once the festival lights had dimmed, the minister



Statue of Egyptian diva Umm Kulthum in front of the Cairo Opera House.
Photograph by Sonali Pahwa.

summarily abandoned his promises to these independent dramatists. The limits of CIFET as a means of liberalizing Egyptian theater had emerged over the years, and they became most poignant now.

This chapter analyzes the project of experimental theater as a vehicle of liberal reform in the last decade of the Mubarak era, against the backdrop of that regime's turn to cultural globalization in the 1990s. The lavish arts festivals of this decade, writes Jessica Winegar, imagined a cultural democracy in which young artists represented a version of cosmopolitan Egyptian citizenship that could travel around the world.⁵ Where prior Egyptian regimes had used state art schools to develop national cultural repertoires, Hosni's turn to festivals and competitions echoed new economic policies in which imports and exports were used to diversify the nation's commodity market. In the theater world, the policy of internationalization made room for genres that straddled the dichotomy of Western and Arab drama that was maintained at state theaters through the demarcation of separate repertoires. However, cultural democracy generated more than new styles of performance onstage. The networking practices of independent troupes developed the theater of cultural democracy into a generational phenomenon. In an archipelago of venues extending across and beyond state cultural institutions, new-generation



Banners advertising the Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theatre dress the walls of downtown's Avant-Garde Theater. Photograph by Sonali Pahwa.

dramatists made space to represent their gender and generational identity politics to mixed urban audiences. CIFET evolved from a temporary venue for consuming experimental theater into a site for launching Egypt's free theater movement (in 1990) and protests against the Ministry of Culture (in 2005). It revealed the permeable boundaries between cultural and political democracy in this era. The evolving roles of independent dramatists as liberal citizens are a central theme of this story. While the ministry intended the festival as a site of transnational artistic exchange, it became a venue for Egyptian dramatists to claim self-representation in more than an aesthetic sense.

Egypt's theatrical avant-gardes had been privileged standard-bearers of liberal citizenship since the early twentieth century, when upper-class members of the liberal Wafd Party promoted theater as a means of building modern character, in its doubled sense as pedagogical and performative.⁶ In 1922, pioneering cultural critic and playwright Muhammad Taymur argued for the need for university theater in a modern nation, claiming that "a competent actor, in the European view, is like a competent minister."⁷ The theme of social value in theater continued to echo in state cultural policy throughout

the century. President Gamal Abdel Nasser's minister of culture Tharwat Okasha declared before Parliament in 1969, "The message of the theater is not merely ease and relaxation; its importance lies, rather, in making the people know itself and realize its existence, and in presenting its problems. The theater is engaged in a role of acculturation which aims at establishing humanist and progressive values and creating new relations between the individual and society."⁸

Following the 1952 Free Officers revolution, when state investment in the arts burgeoned, Egypt's literary, visual, and theatrical arts became well-supported wings of the state project of social modernism through cultural production. As in postcolonial West Africa, Egyptian avant-gardists built on the "contestation of the dominant notion of national culture seen as inauthentic because of its cultural imitativeness, and the struggle for a new conception of the nation and its identity that is rooted in, and does not merely gesture at, the practices of the 'people.'"⁹ Theater proved particularly well suited to representing the nation's people as a diverse modern citizenry, accommodating popular comedy and literary drama within cultural repertoires aimed at the expansively imagined middle classes.

Throughout the twentieth century, generational waves of Egyptian theater were associated less with aesthetic genres (such as absurdism or realism) than with epochs of intellectual debate about national identity. Thus novelist and playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim argued in diametrically opposed terms, in the 1930s and 1960s, for European-style and folksy Egyptian drama.¹⁰ In each decade, his vision for a cultural avant-garde was linked to different political programs. Since the 1990s, however, it had been dramatists working outside state institutions who claimed the mantle of a national avant-garde, framing their vision as structurally independent from politics. The dramatists I examine in this chapter formed an independent theater movement in which avant-gardism included theatrical and activist repertoires in a range of aesthetic styles. Using the historical approach to avant-garde performance outlined by James Harding and John Rouse, I analyze their performances as counterhegemonic gestures in cultural and historical context.¹¹ These dramatists used theater as a site of modernist imagination in counterpoint to state-sponsored visions of the national cultural future. Their avant-gardism from below borrowed experimental techniques from official venues, such as CIFET, to develop unofficial versions of the state project of cultural globalization.

The avant-gardism of Egypt's state theaters echoed what Richard Schechner has called the conservative avant-garde in the United States, which borrows from a historically validated repertoire of radical styles and restages these reverentially, a practice that Schechner criticizes as "circulating stasis."¹² Egypt's avant-garde "theater of the sixties" was similarly restaged in state theaters in the early twenty-first century. However, CIFET helped to open up institutional definitions of avant-garde theater. Like the Lusophone

theater festivals analyzed by Christina McMahon, it opened up national debates about theater's geographies of identity and affinity. These were sustained beyond the time of the festival, and I follow McMahon's lead in exploring the festival's aftermath as a space of productive cultural tension.¹³ The national circulation of experimental theater styles, at CIFET and smaller festivals in its aftermath, raised newly urgent questions, in festival newsletters and seminars, on the contemporary relevance of avant-garde performance in Egypt. The circulation of stasis was interrupted by livelier democratic debates on the relationship between theater and modern citizenship.

Foreign drama had long offered Egyptian avant-gardists a medium for staging political critique in artfully oblique ways. The myriad adaptations of Hamlet as an Arab intellectual speaking truth to power point to this history of creating openings in political debate through literary translation. Such adaptations were incorporated into repertoires of political theater, in Egypt as in Syria, where dramas of corrupt kings and rulers spoke back to official spectacles in which subjects performed loyalty to leaders.¹⁴ After their high point in the late twentieth century, such allegorical styles of political theater grew less central to Arab avant-gardes. Leading playwrights, such as Syria's Saadallah Wannus, became disillusioned with theater about the nation and developed more psychological genres for staging identity.¹⁵ Independent Egyptian dramatists of the early twenty-first century went further in using translated drama to stage personal narratives of alienation, claiming a new cachet for this form of social critique because it was part of an illustrious foreign repertoire. In the cultural economy of the early twenty-first century, the brand name of a European author lent particular prestige to a theater production. It was often used by independent dramatists to claim the privilege of critiquing both political leaders and state-affiliated avant-gardists.

Within a cultural landscape where theater was used to debate modern citizenship, CIFET opened a space for staging cultural responses to new forms of state power. The Ministry of Culture, through its gestures toward a competitive free market in the arts, coupled with budget cuts for standing staff in state theaters, framed itself as an arbiter of artistic value rather than an art producer in the late Mubarak era. However, it did not liberalize laws governing national theater, such as the requirement of membership in the Actors' Union in order to work at state theaters and in television, or the expensive registration needed to open a ticket window for an independent show. Egyptian theater remained very much defined by state institutional frameworks, then, even when the Ministry of Culture called for internationalism. Independent dramatists seeking to democratize theater thus styled themselves as a new national avant-garde, in the same way that the nation remained a vital "category of practice" for visual artists of this time.¹⁶ Rising literary writers of the 1990s who wrote highly personal narratives also maintained nationalist political commitments, despite departing from classic genres of committed literature.¹⁷ As the Mubarak regime announced its

policy of cultural globalization at the close of the twentieth century, young avant-gardists fashioned repertoires that combined cosmopolitan style and national narrative to claim cultural democracy on their own terms. In their repertoires of liberal citizenship, avant-garde art was a means of claiming recognition for the cultural and political rights of citizens. They used theater as a medium of cultural continuity between liberalism in the nation's past and present.

Debating Cultural Democracy at the Festival

Founded in 1988, CIFET rapidly became a focal point for generational debates about the future of theater in Egypt. It attracted Egyptian dramatists of all generations, but my impressions from attending four editions of CIFET from 2002 to 2007 squared with the finding of a survey at the opening festival that the majority of those who attended were under thirty years old.¹⁸ There was a striking demographic difference from the audiences I usually saw at the National, Avant-Garde, and Salam state theaters in Cairo. When leaders of Cairo's university theater scene were interviewed at the first edition, they claimed experimental theater as the special domain of youth. Actor-director Khaled el-Sawy called it the style of a generation "on the cusp of two eras" (*al-mawqif bayn al-'asrayn*). University dramatists like him had long adapted translations as a way of representing their cultural hybridity, and they embraced the eclectic repertoires of experimental theater at CIFET. "We must absorb the past and sift it for new art, with a new ideology opposed to that which is hegemonic," El-Sawy argued.¹⁹ His colleague Mansur Muhammad defined experimental theater by its rebellion against a generation that insisted on "playing the teacher" with new dramatists. "I refuse obedience to past icons that have not proven their worth," he declared.²⁰ Whereas the minister of culture performed a benevolent gesture of granting young dramatists access to foreign trends, they used the festival to claim legitimacy for generational repertoires and disavow the authority of older avant-gardists.

The festival was a window onto cultural democracy that opened in both directions. Egyptian dramatists debated the vista of Egyptian theater at CIFET even more than the foreign visitors for whom the regime curated a showcase of liberal, cosmopolitan Egyptian culture. Much reportage at the early editions of the festival focused on the new troupes that responded to the festival's invitation to fill the stages commissioned for the festival. Their sudden visibility revealed that Cairo's underground theater scene was larger than journalists had anticipated. Samia Habib of *Theater* magazine wrote a report on the unfamiliar new category of "amateurs" (*al-huw'a*). Once seen as a motley collection of troupes with tiny audiences, they were now analyzed as a cultural category: "Who are the amateurs? This question has arisen for those interested in theater in recent years, which have seen evident activity

not in the public and private sectors alone, but in the young leadership of universities, the Mass Culture organization, and workers' groups . . . which raises the question of who these youth are."²¹

Habib's slippage between "youth" and "amateurs" points to the similar structural positions of the two in state cultural discourse. Both were hailed as temporary participants in a theater economy where a professional career was reserved for state employees (or successful film and television actors). To be an amateur was to perform in educational theater at cooperatives within the Supreme Council for Youth and Sports, university troupes, clubs of the General Organization of Cultural Palaces (GOCP), and certain trade unions with theaters, such as the Lawyers' and Journalists' Syndicates. Amateur status precluded dramatists from a legitimate stake in determining the future of national theater. However, the troupes that attracted so much comment at CIFET initiated theatrical and intellectual debate about that future. And the festival was an exceptional space in which their views on cultural democracy could be heard.

In 1990, the minister of culture abruptly took away this forum. Hosni canceled CIFET after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, deciding to forgo festivities as a mark of respect for Egypt's Arab neighbor. Cairo's independent dramatists went up in arms against this high-handed gesture of solidarity by which their opportunity to perform on a national stage was sacrificed. A core group of university troupes called a meeting with supportive theater critics Nehad Selaiha and Menha el-Batraoui to plan an alternative youth festival. The gathering snowballed into a convention, including troupes the critics had never heard of. Selaiha's incredulous description of the meeting on August 23, 1990, points to the gap between their knowledge of Cairo's university theater and the diverse reality of dramatists who performed outside mainstream cultural and educational institutions: "What Menha [el-Batraoui] hadn't bargained for was the existence of a strong and militant, if politically and artistically immature, underground theater movement: young and ardent self-supporting offshoots of the university and state regional theaters, manned by talented former students and amateurs, and lacking any legal status. They came in droves, flaunting fanciful names and clamoring for recognition and the right to participate."²²

Selaiha and El-Batraoui were bilingual, upper-class women, educated respectively in Britain and France, who came of age in the 1970s. Taking stock of the so-called golden age of state theater, they recognized the advantages of liberalizing laws and granting rights to independent troupes. Selaiha taught at the Academy of Arts, and El-Batraoui was a critic at the French-language *Al-Abram Hebdo* newspaper. Their outsider status as women in the leadership of those institutions led them to cheer on young dramatists who embraced experimental theater. Selaiha's use of the English terms "fringe" and "underground" framed independent dramatists not as amateurs, then, but rather as members of an alternative arts community she wished to help grow. In the

manifesto that the two critics compiled, and that twenty-one troupe leaders signed, they described the dramatists further as proponents of “free theater” (*al-masrah al-hurr*): “a group of free theater troupes that have worked for many years in the field of theater with self-funding, in crushing material and personal circumstances, as well as aspersions on the creative powers of these troupes, and discrimination between them and troupes affiliated with the state, on the one hand, and the impossibility of existing on the stage of commercial theater, with its values and resources, on the other.”²³ The critics’ bold new vision of the future of Egyptian theater was evident in the language of their manifesto, a genre historically used by senior state intellectuals to call for new cultural programs.²⁴ The rousing call for change in the free theater manifesto of 1990 marked a new kind of avant-garde voice, young, collective, and situated outside state institutions. As Martin Puchner writes of the manifesto genre, it “project[ed] a scenario for which it must then seek to be the first realization.”²⁵ The manifesto outlined a bill of rights and a template for a new production model for theater. It argued that all citizens deserved the right to perform legally onstage in Egypt, with financial support. And it called on “all domestic bodies and institutions to bear their historic responsibility and act to support cultural and theatrical activities.”²⁶ The manifesto was published in the very next issue of *Theater* magazine, edited by Selaiha’s spouse.

By claiming recognition for independent dramatists as rights-bearing citizens, and the government as their protector, the manifesto proposed a scenario of cultural democracy that extended beyond a single annual festival. Yet it did not call on senior officials in state theaters to step down and make room for a new generation, or demand reforms at those famously stagnant institutions. The troupes signing the manifesto simply asked for legal recognition as they worked with modest means. Selaiha conveyed this manifesto to CIFET president Dr. Fawzi Fahmi, state theater sector head Dr. Karam Mutawi’, and head of the General Egyptian Book Organization Dr. Samir Sarhan. These officials agreed to lend their venues, and a little funding, to hold the Free Theater Festival from October 1 to October 10, 1990. It was a democratic gesture that pleased everyone and cost the state sector little besides the effort of repurposing available performance spaces. The festival gathered troupes “dispersed in obscure corners of the theatrical map” to center stage in Cairo.²⁷ Under the label of free theater, their work was recognized, both artistically and structurally, as a new avant-garde.

For pioneering members of the movement still active in 2004, the manifesto had generated exciting new scenarios of artistic freedom. Cairo-based Saleh Saad, who taught at Minya University and specialized in carnivalesque (*ihthifali*) folk-style theater, had once directed plays for the GOCP. He launched an independent troupe after running into difficulties with state institutions. “It was to be expected that the [carnivalesque] alternative to established theater would be irreverent,” he wrote, “but provocative statements always caused

anxiety in the official theater.”²⁸ When the free theater manifesto was created, he signed it, seizing the hope for a legal framework that would allow him to take his plays to different audiences.²⁹ Another dramatist who had been thriving on the margins of GOCP theater, Abeer Ali, also signed it. She had felt marginalized as a feminist in the male-dominated state organization and was glad to join a community in which she could use repertoires of folk performance to compose her own feminist dramas (see chapter 4).

Most members of the free theater movement came from Cairo-based university troupes, seeking recognition and opportunities to perform beyond their student years. The Shrapnel troupe, which represented Egypt in CIFET 2003, was founded by Cairo University students in English literature and philosophy. Director Mohamed Aboul Seoud adapted British drama and Saadallah Wannus with equal ease, actor Nora Amin was a translator of French, and Hany El-Metennawy was pursuing a Ph.D. in sports education. The well-read troupe held its own in university contests and sought the opportunity to compete on an equal footing with state troupes at CIFET. “We are the illegitimate children of Egyptian theater,” El-Metennawy explained sardonically when I asked why this had proved a struggle. “All we want is a bridge to the government system, so that they don’t dismiss us as terrorists.”³⁰ In previous decades, members of a gifted university troupe would readily have found work at state theaters; now they sought the same right as an independent collective.

A key right that free theater dramatists sought from the Ministry of Culture was protection from harassment by Islamist student groups that emerged on university campuses in the 1990s. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Khaliq’s independent Atelier troupe was one that had thrived at the College of Fine Arts, winning prizes in university competitions, until Islamist students called for the theater to close.³¹ Such intermittent threats reminded Egyptian dramatists that some audiences deemed their art irredeemably Western, no matter how local its content. The origins of national theater in secularist urban circles defined its aesthetics of freedom for outsiders in terms that were sometimes controversial. As graduates of university drama went on to independent theater, then, they relied on the Ministry of Culture to protect their rights to free expression under the umbrella of cultural democracy. Like ‘Abd al-Khaliq, many dramatists called themselves secular and embodied a distinctive cosmopolitan style. The younger men wore their hair long and smoked cigarettes, the women frequently did not cover their hair, and they socialized freely across genders. The university style of the free theater movement was bolstered by its absorption of many university graduates who remained unemployed, for months or years, and took refuge in theater spaces as an extension of the college campus.³²

As free theater grew into a cultural phenomenon, centered on the downtowns of Cairo and Alexandria, the Ministry of Culture sought to corral it in controlled environments. The free theater manifesto had gained an exceptional concession of rights through an unusual set of circumstances. The ministry

curated a more strategically liberal theater culture in the 1990s, launching annual events at cultural palaces nationwide and monitoring university festivals carefully. In Cairo, it cultivated a small showcase of experimental theater within the confines of the opera house campus by assigning an unused building for use by independent troupes. The circles of free theater continued to proliferate, but the Ministry of Culture invited select members of the original manifesto movement to work within a zone of artistic freedom, gaining state support with political limits. This gesture of recognition built a provisional wall around free theater. The ministry assumed that if the movement could be contained within monitored art spaces, claims of cultural democracy could be limited as well.

Curating Freedom: The Hanager Theater as Liberal Showcase

When the buzz of experimental theater dissipated after each edition of CIFET, it lingered in a special building on the Cairo Opera House grounds. The Hanager Arts Center (Al-Markaz al-Hanagir li-l-Funun) consisted of a 350-seat theater and a spacious art gallery, linked by a long cafeteria. The theater opened in 1992 and was allocated soon after as a venue for experimental theater on the island campus, which had been inaugurated with a Japanese-built opera house in 1985.³³ In the same way that Cairo's old opera house in 'Ataba Square formed part of an entertainment quarter, including the National Theater (formerly the Comédie Française), the new opera campus built on Gezira Island came to include a modern art museum, a music library, a theater, and the Supreme Council for Culture building. Unlike 'Ataba's old arts district, however, the walled and gated new opera grounds welcomed a carefully screened set of audiences for European-style arts.

Young visitors found a more welcoming space at the concrete Hanager than at the stately marble buildings of the opera. Passing through a perfunctory, primitive metal detector, they entered a red-painted cafeteria staffed by friendly waiters who bantered with regulars, kept actors' tabs, and knew the critics to whom special deference was due. Many Cairenes flocked to enjoy the atmosphere of the cafeteria, whether or not they were actors themselves. It was an inexpensive place to meet friends or hash out plans for a new show. When I came to the cafeteria for my biweekly meetings with Selaiha or lingered there after attending a rehearsal, the front tables were inevitably filled with actors discussing photocopied playscripts over tea while demurely head-scarved young women met their dates in discreet corners. The respectably liberal atmosphere of the Hanager, like a college cafeteria, made it a haven for youthful conversation of different kinds.

The presiding deity of the Hanager was its director, Dr. Hoda Wasfi. A professor of French literature at 'Ain Shams University, she arrived in a chauffeured car to her office next to the theater. A single secretary outside



Hanager theater, December 2010. Photograph by Sonali Pahwa.

scheduled her appointments, and the theater had a tiny scene design crew. The Hanager's budget was evidently far more modest than that of other state theaters. However, it did offer production budgets to twelve shows by unaffiliated directors each year. Independent troupe leaders thus made regular pilgrimages to Wasfi's office with play pitches, steeling themselves for blunt but helpful feedback. "There is not much cooperation between older critics and the younger generation—they don't adopt the young folks," Wasfi observed in explaining her desire to mentor youth. Her professorial background, which included heading a student club (*usra*) for theater and music at 'Ain Shams, encouraged her to guide rising dramatists with lessons from her own training. She passed on to favored protégés her taste for translated European drama and proudly claimed credit for "raising the new generation of dramatists." However, she espoused an inclusive concept of experimental theater as essentially a "culture of questioning."³⁴

Wasfi's commitment to training led her to spend a large portion of the Hanager's budget on acting workshops given by eminent directors such as Roger Assaf and Nidal Abu Murad, from Lebanon, and Qasim Muhammad, from Iraq. Although new waves of dramatists applied to work at the Hanager after its first decade, Wasfi referred to them all as a single generation, which needed nurturing so it could mature. "This generation is new in every respect. It is always searching, experimenting, trying new paths," she declared. Using a handpicked group of free theater pioneers to represent the leadership of

this generation, Wasfi created a model for a new avant-garde consisting of university theater graduates from a cosmopolitan, middle-class background. A friend whose troupe was not part of this roster referred to it ironically as “the favored ten” (*al-‘ashara al-tayyiba*). Since the theater hosted ten to twelve productions each year, and regularly featured favorites, the Hanager’s repertoire expand more slowly than the free theater troupes over the years. Moreover, the success of the Hanager’s model gave the core troupes of the free theater movement enough opportunities in the 1990s to make organizing their annual festival unnecessary. Wasfi’s parallel role as head of CIFET at this time boosted their opportunities to perform and gain recognition before international critics. Thus the plan to contain the manifesto movement to a small group of troupes worked well until 2002.

During this time of spatial containment, the free theater troupes nevertheless produced strikingly critical art. The first of their plays that I saw, at CIFET 2001, was a topical adaptation of the Greek tragedy *Phaedra*. The Shrapnel troupe’s Mohamed Aboul Seoud decided to rewrite the incestuous plot as the story of an unemployed Cairo man. Director Hany El-Metennawy played the young Hippolytus as a lonely youth smoking in his room, resisting his stepmother’s seduction, while his tyrant father went on voyages of war and plunder. *Meta-Phaedra* was a controversial choice for the CIFET selection committee, but Wasfi persuaded them that it would not cause offense since the festival was “for foreigners.” The daringly sexual play about youthful frustration won success at CIFET and a ten-day run at the Hanager. While such decisions bolstered the Hanager’s permissive reputation, they attracted attacks in the press. A vituperative review in the popular weekly journal *Ruz al-Yusuf* compared the play to anthrax.³⁵ Meanwhile, a pair of reviews in the highbrow *Theater* magazine applauded the play for its imaginative and technical brilliance.³⁶ Using a translated play to tell a shocking Egyptian story became a signature strategy of the Shrapnel troupe and other independent troupes.

Not all free theater troupes resorted to foreign texts, however, as the price of free expression. They feared this tactic would make their avant-garde appear alienated from the Egyptian middle classes they sought to address. It was telling that the favored Shrapnel troupe’s leader spearheaded a departure from the Hanager and its curated repertoire by reviving the Free Theater Festival after a hiatus of seven years. El-Metennawy and his fellow free theater pioneers decided to pool their resources to book the theater of the Russian Cultural Center in Al-Doqqi for a five-day festival in March 2002. Now in their thirties, these dramatists had the financial and cultural capital to strike out on their own. And they hoped that by leaving behind the opera house grounds, they could attract broader audiences. The new Free Theater Festival emphasized its popular orientation with the theme “light comedy” (*al-kumidiya al-khafifa*). It was even more accessible because entry to the plays was free, since independent dramatists could not legally sell tickets. The

diligent advertising and well-chosen comedies from the troupes' repertoires made the festival a hit, with full houses at most shows. Since only ten troupes could be accommodated, it was necessarily a small festival. Yet the gesture of taking free theater out of the Hanager, and showing that it attracted large audiences, won these troupes a reputation as an avant-garde at large.

It was at this point that members of the original manifesto movement decided to form a cooperative and change their identification from *free* theater to *independent* theater. Paradoxically, the latter term signified artistic independence with state support. The bold gesture of 2002 had proved too expensive to sustain. "We have no wings with which to soar above state institutions," wrote movement critic Rasha Abdel Moneim, "nor an earthmover to shake the foundation of the establishment."³⁷ Ten troupes began legal proceedings to form the Independent Theater Troupes' Training and Studies Cooperative (Jama'iyat Dirasat wa Tadrib al-Firaq al-Masrahiyya al-Hurra). This was a less expensive option than registering as a corporation, and it accorded with their preference for noncapitalist models of organizing. The cooperative launched in 2004 and applied successfully to revive its annual festival with funding from the Hanager. Its new title of Independent Theater Festival attracted much debate, which the troupes encouraged in the daily newsletter printed throughout the festival. Elder playwright Saad Ardash and veteran critic Luis Gris dismissed the troupes' claims to independence when interviewed for the festival newsletter. Younger critics like Hazem Shehata defended the arrangement as one of taxpaying citizens, for whom "state support [*al-da'm*] is our right."³⁸ El-Metennawy underscored the national contribution of independent theater by noting that it was "distinctive in penetrating problems that arise in society, like poverty, ignorance and power."³⁹ The discourse of cultural democracy that emerged in the 2004 and 2005 editions of the Independent Theater Festival allowed young dramatists to speak not as Hanager protégés but rather as citizen artists.

The opening-night show of the 2004 festival thematized artistic independence provocatively. An adaptation of Slawomir Mrozek's Polish play *Striptease* (rendered in Arabic as *Al-ta'arri qita' qita'*) staged the story of an intellectual and an activist who had been jailed for obscure reasons and now voiced absurd statements to justify their freedom despite their abject circumstances. The two men were Egyptianized, the intellectual as upper class and the activist as working class, with the former speaking earnestly about his dignity as he was forced to strip by the mysterious figure called "the hand." Festival audiences applauded the depiction of a police state and laughed at the intellectual (played by El-Metennawy), who believed that cooperation would protect him. Such bold gestures of defiance against the hand that fed independent theater belied the fact that directors did rely on the Hanager to protect them from state censors and conservative social critics. Independent dramatists faced a conundrum. Avant-garde theater had the most cultural prestige at the Hanager, where it was perceived as legitimate critique

by educated audiences, critics, and intellectuals. However, the limits of free expression here shifted unexpectedly as the neoliberal state calibrated its force to produce manageable versions of freedom. These dramatists began working, then, to build protocols of independence that could carry over to other institutions. They used their experience in negotiating with Wasfi and CIFET authorities to apply for funding from the Cultural Development Fund and other theater venues. As independent theater gained wide recognition, cultural centers across Cairo and Alexandria joined the movement and launched their own theater festivals.

Detaching the avant-garde gesture of performing freedom from its original location allowed for independent theater repertoires to circulate and evolve more broadly. Within Mike Sell's concept of avant-garde performance as a vector of radical thought, the movement's separation from the Hanager produced new directions of avant-garde practice.⁴⁰ How did its repertoires of cultural democracy and liberal citizenship travel and evolve? Could they work in spaces outside the protected realms of state-sponsored liberalism? The festival mode of organization and avant-garde performance proved adaptable, and even thrived outside state institutions. And the avant-garde that expanded once the free theater movement broke the bounds of the Hanager traced a more broadly democratic path for theater as a stage for representational practice.

Fugitive Repertoires and Traveling Avant-Gardes

The years 2002–5 saw much growth in free theater as new troupes formed by recent college graduates joined the movement. As the pioneering 1990s generation rose to leadership, its members recognized that the younger dramatists they mentored needed opportunities of their own. They sympathized with the growing discontent at the ways in which curators at the Hanager and the Bibliotheca Alexandrina defined experimental performance. Specialists in folk-style theater were displeased that translated drama was so prominent, and modern dancers wished their work could gain a theater audience. Moreover, the demand of deference to state officials rankled performers who wished to chart their own path. Critic Rasha Abdel Moneim wrote in her retrospective of the movement that its academic patrons had “promoted free theater as an alternative theater, an artistic form that does not suffer from the weight of bureaucracy,” but regretted that they had “anointed [independent dramatists] as revolutionaries and gave them dimensions of political struggle that did not originate with them.”⁴¹ After they formed the cooperative, cultural rights claims took precedence over the political statements of the original manifesto. For instance, the protocol of the independent troupes' cooperative simply outlined how to apply for funds and negotiate contracts with sponsors. The dry legal terms in which independents were now trying

to define their movement separated the idea of a cultural avant-garde from a political one. Framing their claims in terms of cultural rights appropriated the promise of cultural democracy in relatively uncontroversial liberal terms.

Independent troupes that took their work outside the Hanager found foreign cultural centers to be their most reliable partners. The festival model continued to serve them well here. In the early 2000s, downtown Cairo's Centre Français de Culture et de Coopération (CFCC) launched its own theater festival, which embraced a wide range of performance styles. The center, headed by French-educated cultural programmer Latifa Fahmy, had a reputation as both a language study institute and a cultural destination. The French language had long provided a cultural repertoire of cosmopolitanism without colonial power dynamics for Egyptian intellectuals, and French lycées offered more affordable bilingual education than English schools.⁴² The CFCC, in the heart of Cairo and close to public transportation, was thus well loved by downtown arts aficionados. The center had a theater that played uncensored Egyptian and French films. A small festival of French theater by language students proved so popular that, in 2003, Fahmy launched an annual theater festival, without any requirement that performances have a connection with French. Each January, Jeunes Créateurs (Young Directors) hosted fifteen to twenty shows. With a younger audience than the Independent Theater Festival, this festival became a key venue for experimental theater that was explicitly dissociated from a national avant-garde.

Fahmy was a relative outsider to the world of theater, but she used her connections in the art world to assemble festival juries of critics across genres. In 2004, the Young Directors curators included ballet dancer Laila Sha'ir, modern dancer Walid Aouni, playwright and professor Sameh Mahran, and film actor Vanya Exerjian. The jury featured theater critics Nehad Selaiha and Nabil Badran and film critic Rafiq al-Sabban. They devised a festival program that mixed genres more fluidly than did state venues for theater or dance. The seventeen performances chosen for the festival included adaptations of plays by Bertolt Brecht and Salah 'Abd al-Sabbur, self-scripted performances, and four dance theater shows. Playing outside the lines of propriety enforced at the Hanager, Young Directors hosted several unconventional performances of generational and gender identity. The protection from censorship offered by a foreign cultural center made the use of translated texts less necessary.

The prizewinning performance of 2004, *Intersections of an Everyday Disorder*, and the most controversial show, *Solo Player*, were both self-scripted shows about young masculinity. The latter was a one-person dance theater piece by a young man from Minya. He moved between motions of Islamic prayer, traditional stick dancing, and club dance, silently embodying the dancer's struggles with identity. *Intersections* was also a movement-based performance, featuring three young men who crossed through a space while avoiding collisions. The simple acting school exercise staged a near-clash of men "who carry three different ideologies," according to the program

blurb.⁴³ Ahmad Rubi, in a black leather jacket, and Sameh Ezzat, with a short beard and scarf, portrayed a version of their real-life relationship as college friends with secular and religious beliefs, respectively. A third male actor was dressed in a business suit. Their movements accelerated with a drumbeat and the voice-over of readings from an article by Egyptian psychiatrist Yahya al-Rakhawy titled “The Revolt of Madness.” These performances of ideological confusion staged contemporary struggles of youth identity that went unrepresented in literary drama. The scandalized whispers—or festival prizes—that these performances received affirmed that they made an impact as social commentaries without explicit political statements.

Performing at the CFCC festival offered independent dramatists creative distance from the norms and forms of a national avant-garde. Juries instead discussed performances at Young Directors as youth culture, commenting approvingly on the use of experimental styles (such as modern dance) to extend the formal possibilities of Egyptian theater. The free theater movement traveled here as a *cultural* avant-garde, in which original narratives and technical innovation won performers cultural capital. Self-representation could be more creative, outside the norms of citizenship assigned to “youth of the theater” in the state theater establishment. They performed as social critics more than as political dissidents, and their experimental aesthetics appeared less politically charged than at CIFET or the Free Theater Festival.

The festival model became a proliferating framework for independent theater, building a fugitive avant-garde that echoed the “general antagonism to politics looming outside every attempt to politicize” in what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten call the undercommons.⁴⁴ By taking the festival model to underground venues, independent dramatists refused to allow their creative work to be appropriated toward the identity politics of state institutions. They were not dissidents to be co-opted but rather independents to be reckoned with. They gained less visibility for other festival performances than they did at the Hanager, where theater critics from all major newspapers reviewed plays. Yet the recognition they received from critics on the CFCC jury did boost the reputations of successful performances at Young Directors. Prizewinners also went on trips to the Avignon theater festival in France, funded by the French embassy in Cairo. The alternative forms of cultural currency they acquired through circulation at festivals contested the authority of the Ministry of Culture as the sole arbiter of transnational exchange in theater. It also allowed performers to test their repertoires before a wider range of audiences.

In the early 2000s, the theater festival revealed its flexibility as a medium of avant-garde culture when it allowed independent dramatists to use experimental theater as currency outside the state cultural economy. The combination of dance, folk-style theater, and self-scripted performances at these festivals extended the frame of European-style avant-gardism to win audiences for various Egyptian youth repertoires as well. Participating in



Rawabet Theater, opened by the independent troupes' collective in 2005.
Photograph by Sonali Pahwa.

the CFCC festival granted performers an automatic legitimacy as part of a cosmopolitan avant-garde. As I discuss in chapter 4, adapting translations remained a privileged means for young directors to claim cosmopolitan credentials. It was remarkable, however, that the prize for best performance regularly went to self-scripted shows about contemporary Egyptian life, such as *Intersections*. The translation of foreign experimental theater into Egyptian genres seemed more complete at independent festivals. Dramatic characters here looked different from the “soldiers of the cultural battleground” that Farouk Hosni had called on to internationalize the Egyptian avant-garde.⁴⁵ They used their avant-garde status to valorize their refusal of the role of exemplary citizens, as outlined by the Ministry of Culture.

By trading on the value of transnational experimental theater promoted at CIFET, these dramatists were able to gain growing recognition for an avant-garde that represented their generation. The label “independent troupe” (*firqa mustaqilla*), which Hanager-sponsored troupes added to clarify their affiliation on posters, came to be used widely by newer troupes. Identifying with the independent theater movement added cachet to university and other amateur troupes. Their borrowing of cultural capital through affiliation had its limits, however. The new avant-garde reflected some of the cultural hierarchies of

the old, as performers trained in European literature, drama, or dance gained more opportunities at festivals. Traveling outside the protected bounds of state theaters did nonetheless evolve transnational styles, as independent dramatists grew their avant-garde through new modes of community building. The horizontal connections that characterized the avant-garde at large showed that cultural democracy did not need state institutions to thrive. Urban troupes capitalized instead on informal connections and the relative freedom of big cities to make communal spaces of independent performance.

As Cairo-based troupes sought to build connections with their counterparts across the nation, they had to travel through the more monitored infrastructure of the GOCP. This network of state-owned cultural centers offered both a physical and a cultural framework for youth theater, to which members of the Cairo avant-garde wished to connect. Some were graduates of GOCP troupes themselves. When the GOCP launched a nationwide program of festivals and workshops, its independent-minded allies experimented with reinterpreting the organization's traditional civilizing mission in the terms of a new avant-garde.

Avant-Gardism in the Provinces

The oasis town of Al-Fayum was less than a hundred miles from Cairo, but a world away for visitors from the capital. In July 2009, the little van in which I traveled to the GOCP festival for professional troupes was packed with staffers eager to escape Cairo's steamy summer. Several were journalists visiting to write about the festival, including my new friend Magdi, a critic from the town of Al-Mahalla. They were part of the GOCP, a national institution for grassroots cultural production that had originated with the name of the People's University in 1945 and expanded into the Mass Culture Organization in 1965 before acquiring its present name in 1989. In each incarnation, the GOCP was an instrument of the ideology of "cultural cultivation" (*tathqif*) espoused by Egyptian regimes through their shifts from constitutional monarchy to state socialism to neoliberalism.⁴⁶ As its original name indicated, it had an educational as well as cultural mandate aimed at young amateur artists. The current festival was part of the latest cultural policy for fulfilling that mandate.

Recent GOCP publications wrote of art as a means of "enlightened thought" (*al-fikr al-mustanir*), teaching modern citizenship with a specifically secularist ethic. In his editorial to the program of the Scientific Conference on Egyptian Theater in the Provinces in 2007, dramatist Abd al-Rahman al-Shafi'i expounded on Islamism as an "internal challenge" on par with the "external challenge" of cultural globalization and the "hegemony of a market culture."⁴⁷ His vision of theater as a cultural defense portrayed the avant-garde in instrumentalized terms similar to those of Hosni, though his tone was more

nationalist. Surprisingly, it was an ideology with which several independent dramatists from Cairo agreed. Abeer Ali, a leading figure in Cairo's free theater, regularly worked with the organization, where she got her start as an amateur from Suez. "I'm a daughter of the Theater Clubs [Nawadi al-Masrah]," she asserted in response to my surprise at finding her at Cairo's Manf Cultural Palace in 2009.⁴⁸ "I started my career here in 1989, as an assistant director and then a director." There had been a key change in the organization's mission since Ali found her path to Cairo through the GOCP. Now, it mainly produced festivals, as a means of cultivating "theater culture" (*al-thaqafa al-masrahiya*) in the provinces. The vans of Cairo critics who traveled to these festivals came to converse with small-town dramatists as part of a new economy in which the vector of enlightenment moved from the capital to smaller towns.

I went with Magdi to a streetside café where other visiting dramatists and bureaucrats were also lingering before the play, conspicuous by their urban clothing in a place where men of the town wore traditional robes (*galabiya*). Eventually, we headed to the cultural palace itself, where we were told GOCP theater head Essam el-Sayed was expecting us. The wiry veteran director, now in his sixties, seemed imposing when I interviewed him in Cairo. Here in Al-Fayum, he wore a casual polo shirt and joked with junior critics, reading out their conflicting reviews of the same play and saying they should fight it out. In Al-Fayum, they were all part of an urban cultural elite. Coming out to festivals on bumpy roads and driving back the same night was a ritual by which they affirmed the enduring value of the institution that helped to make Egyptian theater truly national.

When El-Sayed took over the Theater Sector in 2009, he was tasked with bringing it up to speed with a theater economy that valued professional standards. "Mass Culture theater had become a theater without an audience," he told me, using the old term for the GOCP. "I was asked for a strategy to improve the quality rather than quantity of productions. So I framed some rules, including a limit on the number of times the same text could be performed. Troupes are now evaluated and assigned points, which they gain by performing new texts." El-Sayed applied an ideology of productivity that characterized cultural policy under Hosni, framing theater as a means not just of enlightenment but also of capacity building. "In the third world, art must develop human capabilities [*al-qadarat al-bashariya*]," he told me. "You expand someone's horizons so that he becomes an effective person and engaged citizen."⁴⁹ His new program included both educational workshops and festivals, which circulated existing resources in the GOCP to nurture talent across the nation. The cultural dissemination that he envisioned was founded on an economic model aimed at measurable progress. As a result, provincial festivals often took on the air of a bureaucratic exercise.

When night fell in Al-Fayum, the GOCP professional troupe's production of a 1970s drama by Alfred Farag marked an anticlimactic end to the festival

journey. Folksy songs and labored dialogue in classical Arabic transposed the historical drama clumsily into contemporary times. My colleagues from Cairo gave it a perfunctory round of applause and headed out for a cigarette. Young local actors came over to introduce themselves and chat about theatrical trends. They were eager to avail themselves of the presence of cultural authorities from Cairo, and my colleagues were happy to answer their questions. The ritual of the GOCP festival offered an opportunity to play the part of public intellectuals. As my fellow travelers salvaged from an otherwise disappointing festival the pleasure of friendly debate, they found unofficial avenues for cultural exchange with colleagues in the provinces who were interested in the arts. Those youth embodied the Cairo intellectuals' idea of the "cultured individual" (*muthaqqaf*) in other ways as well, as they smoked cigarettes and wore Western clothes. The festival saw such connections flicker so briefly that I questioned the investment of time and effort in it. But my fellow travelers in the van back to Cairo that night shrugged off my concerns. They were glad to make the trip and connect with young dramatists in the provinces. In some instances, casual connections resulted in dramatists producing the work of playwrights from other towns, as I saw in a festival production of Rasha Abdel Moneim's feminist one-woman drama later that summer. GOCP festivals produced occasional collaborations that challenged the organization's Cairocentric vision of cultural outreach.

The festivals offered brief, utopian glimpses of a national avant-garde, despite all their entrenched hierarchies. The Mubarak regime's renewed investment in GOCP theater since the 1990s was aimed at fostering liberal cosmopolitanism in "cultural counterpoint to economic liberalism."⁵⁰ Its equal desire to monitor youth culture and prevent young Egyptians from turning Islamist gave the GOCP's cultural enlightenment project a limited focus. Yet idealistic participants at the festivals realized their latent potential, using them to have conversations and make connections outside formal discussions. Particularly committed GOCP workers lamented that they could not engage in more enduring forms of cultural exchange. "If only we could hold workshops all over Egypt, in places like Sinai and the desert oases," Ali lamented. "They don't have enough cultural production there."⁵¹ She believed in cultivating theatrical talent across the nation. Other friends in Cairo's independent theater community disparaged the GOCP's national project as an old-fashioned civilizing mission. However, younger actors hoping for a chance to break into theater and media saw a rare avenue for access to a national avant-garde here. The socialist dream of the arts as a vector of upward mobility was one that they wanted to uphold in times of capitalist neoliberalism.

In 2008, a group of art journalists working for state television and newspapers tried to animate a national avant-garde through a grassroots initiative. They collaborated with students in art criticism and theater to launch a tabloid-style cultural newspaper intended specifically for young dramatists.

The editorial office of *Masrahuna* (*Our Theater*) was housed in the Giza Cultural Palace, across from the Academy of Arts campus in Cairo, where several contributing writers studied. Editor in chief Masoud Shuman was a poet writing in colloquial Arabic, and he brought an inclusive approach to what he considered an unnecessarily “priestly” (*kahnuti*) view of theater in the academy. He sent reporters out to cover theater of all kinds. “At first, we thought we’d last a few months at most,” he told me. “But the reality we found was that theatrical life in Egypt is plentiful, despite all the pressures on it. All the provinces practice theater, as do public-sector companies and cultural palaces. All universities and colleges have theater troupes, too.”⁵² The newspaper channeled this vitality into an inclusive representation of national avant-garde theater. *Our Theater* grew so successful that senior GOCP bureaucrats began writing columns for it. And when the editors persuaded academy professors to give a summer lecture series at the office, in 2008 and 2009, these “workshops” drew theater enthusiasts from across Egypt. I met attendees from Port Said, Al-Fayum, Minya, and Aswan among crowds of GOCP amateurs from Cairo. They were glad for the chance to study with professors at an otherwise very exclusive academy. “I have a full notebook from the lectures that I can share with my friends in Aswan,” one attendee, Hany, told me. Another regional dramatist, Tariq, recorded the lectures on a handheld video camera. The imagined community of *Our Theater’s* readership had come together, and its idealism was palpable.

The enthusiasm that the cultural palaces inspired in veteran Cairo dramatists like Essam el-Sayed attested to their enduring nostalgia for the idea of national theater. In Cairo, El-Sayed worked mainly for commercial productions. But like his contemporary director Galal al-Sharqawi, who owned a private theater, he retained a job in the state sector. These men in their sixties and seventies were of a generation in which memories of Nasserist socialism coexisted with hardnosed entrepreneurial practices. Al-Sharqawi’s Al-Gala’ Theater was known for glitzy musicals. But at a lecture series organized by *Our Theater* in 2008, he brought out his academic training (and a vintage tweed jacket) to discuss ancient and modern concepts of European political drama in impeccable formal Arabic. “Theater affects society,” he said, repeating a motto of his generation in conclusion. “It is not just an art—it is a jihad.”⁵³ Like leftist Cuban dramatists, these Egyptians evinced a nostalgia for a golden age of amateur theater that was part of a longing for the era when social revolution seemed possible.⁵⁴ Yet young Egyptians had little hope of making professional careers in theater today. When students at Al-Sharqawi’s lecture asked the great man how they could make theater that benefited society and won them jobs, he offered no answers. The idea of a progressive national theater continued to bring generations of Egyptian dramatists together in projects like *Our Theater* nonetheless.

At the summer workshop, the abstract concept of “youth of the theater” in state publications materialized in utopian form. It was necessarily short-lived,

as there were not resources to extend the project beyond two summers. Yet the newspaper's gesture of educational support for young dramatists legitimized a larger project of representing Egyptian theater in its regional and generational breadth. Young culture journalists wrote about their friends' plays and showed they were well versed in national and international dramatic literature. Unlike GOCP festivals, where well-meaning juries lectured young dramatists, moreover, the newspaper gave provincial artists the chance to represent themselves as cultured and capable. Meanwhile, bureaucrats could perform here as benevolent older statesmen. GOCP head Ahmed Megahid wrote in *Our Theater* that its "cultural and artistic activities herald the consciousness of beauty, belonging, and love," while editor Yusri Hassaan's paean to "the enthusiasm, commitment, and love" of workshop participants underscored the affective dimensions of the initiative he had founded.⁵⁵ These did not fit within the rules of productivity that El-Sayed set forth for evaluating GOCP productions. But they seemed paradoxically to fulfill the mission of the GOCP festivals: the exchange of theatrical knowledge across generations and regions. The ideal of state support for theater was staged in such brief rituals. A catastrophic failure of the ritual process had recently revealed that the Ministry of Culture was neglecting its mission, and it brought Cairo dramatists and peers in the provinces together in a demonstration of avant-garde solidarity.

The September 5 Movement and a New Manifesto for Cultural Democracy

On September 5, 2005, a performance at the annual amateur Nawadi al-Masrah (Theater Clubs) festival ended in tragedy. A group of Cairo theater critics and directors had traveled to the southern town of Beni Suef to serve on the festival jury and sat in the front row. A nightmarish accident at the start of a play—a lighted candle knocked over onstage—created a blaze that spread through the hall. The theater doors were locked according to state security rules, and forty-six people died, including the entire jury. As shock waves reverberated through the Cairo theater community, leaders of the independent theater movement demanded the resignation of the minister of culture. When he refused, they called for a boycott of CIFET, due to begin a few days later. Once again, CIFET saw the inception of a manifesto movement. This time, the manifesto claimed political as well as cultural rights. It was published on a blog and addressed to a broader audience than state authorities, describing the movement as "a group that was born on this day of shock, amid the smell of deadly smoke, when more than 35 actors and critics and spectators died in the burning of the Beni Suef Cultural Palace. We decided to form a fact-finding committee in order to hold to account those responsible for what happened, those whose neglect turned a mistake into

a terrible tragedy.”⁵⁶ An early blog post on September 29 simply listed lawyers who had volunteered to help families of the deceased. Next appeared four eyewitness accounts, gathered by Alexandria director Ibrahim al-Furn. They noted that the fifty-seat theater had been filled well over capacity, with about 150 people attending, and that fire extinguishers were locked away in another room. Finally, a founding statement (*bayan ta’sisi*) listed the aims of the movement succinctly:

Bringing to account those responsible.

Establishing measures to prevent the recurrence of what happened, to which end we seek to establish a council of independent arts monitors.

Protecting the safety of theater workers as well as their material and artistic rights.⁵⁷

While members of the Egyptian theater community attempted to investigate what had happened and come to terms with the death of so many colleagues, the Ministry of Culture decided simply to proceed with CIFET. The independent troupes were outraged and called for a boycott. A blog post featured a “statement issued by the Independent Theater Troupes’ Training and Studies Cooperative and the cream of Egyptian intellectuals,” calling for the resignation of the ministers of culture, health, and interior.⁵⁸ It had first been issued at a press conference held to coincide with a hasty Ministry of Culture event honoring the “martyrs” of Beni Suef. The petition garnered 407 signatures, including those of eminent Egyptian poets Ahmad Fuad Nigm and Sayed Higab, novelists Sonallah Ibrahim and Radwa Ashour, and movie star Mahmoud Hemeida.⁵⁹ Arab newspapers such as *Al-Safir* and *Al-Hayaat*, alongside Egyptian independent journals like *Akhbar al-Adab*, wrote articles in support of the boycott that the blog reposted. An article from Jerusalem-based *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* even noted that the minister conscripted employees to fill empty seats at CIFET after the boycott and stationed plainclothes police to prevent September 5 activists from entering.⁶⁰ Lebanese journalist Pierre Abi Saab declared that “starring roles [at CIFET] this year went to the heroes of that tragedy which extended beyond the stage to expose the truth, with its scandals and tragedies.”⁶¹ The international recognition that CIFET had gained for the free theater movement now attracted foreign visitors to their cause. Troupes from Italy, Jordan, Serbia, Montenegro, and Senegal quickly withdrew from the festival.

The tragedy at the national Theater Clubs festival, so soon before the transnational spectacle of CIFET, laid bare the contradictions of theater policy under Farouk Hosni. While handpicked Cairo dramatists had gained support from the ministry, their colleagues in the provinces suffered terrible neglect. The leaders of the September 5 movement, including Khaled el-Sawy and Muhammad ‘Abd al-Khaliq, used their status as anointed avant-gardists to dramatize this nationwide crisis of rights. Their blog gathered signatories at home and abroad, including Egyptian human rights organizations that

were forming at the time, such as Markaz al-Janub. The September 20 protest outside the opening ceremony of CIFET was joined by different wings of the new Egyptian Movement for Change (Al-Haraka al-Masriyya min Ajl al-Taghyir), known by its brief moniker Kefaya (Enough!). Formed ahead of the 2005 presidential elections, this umbrella group included Artists for Change, Doctors for Change, Youth for Change, and Journalists for Change, all of whom participated in the festival boycott. The demands of cultural democracy set the stage for a more political rights movement.

The September 5 manifesto was a different kind of political statement from that of the free theater movement: it was explicitly opposed to and critical of the Mubarak regime. Its claims rested, however, on the ground laid by the earlier cultural rights movement. That founding scenario of youthful anger and activism in the face of state neglect, which extracted concessions from sympathetic state officials, was replayed in a more strident voice in 2005. It eventually achieved results: Minister Farouk Hosni resigned, though President Hosni Mubarak refused to accept his resignation. And theaters nationwide were slated for renovation in 2006, among them the Hanager, which stayed closed for the next two years. The September 5 movement dissipated almost as quickly as it had emerged, and by January, the blog was no longer updated. However, the betrayal that independent dramatists felt at this juncture cemented their break from state theaters. The drama of cultural citizenship had been exposed as a farce, and several avant-gardists joined antiregime movements like Kefaya.

The September 5 movement was the first in a series of Egyptian political initiatives named after a protest event (such as those of April 6, 2008, and January 25, 2011). In it, the rights claims of middle-class, university-educated artists coincided with those of many more Egyptians whose lives were at everyday risk from the malfunction of the state. As passenger ferries sank and trains collided, the Mubarak regime's neglect of citizens became spectacularly visible in its last years. Independent Cairo dramatists put a sympathetic face on that neglect for interlocutors within the state establishment, and deployed their role as standard-bearers of cultural democracy to call for political change. It was symbolically significant that the independent dramatists now boycotted CIFET, when they had once fought against its cancellation. They were ready to seek other theaters for their performances of citizenship.

Though CIFET had been founded to generate "symbols for the nation," independent theater makers used it to develop flexible repertoires of rights claims as citizens of a new generation. The leaders of the independent theater movement enacted cultural democracy within the privileged habitus that they shared with state-employed intellectuals. Their liberal rights claims began to move across and beyond cultural institutions after Beni Suef, even as the GOCF and Ministry of Culture worked to contain them within arts festivals. The path from state-sponsored cultural democracy to democratic rights movements was far from a straight line, as it might appear if we saw the former as a rehearsal

for revolution. Rather, the combination of theatrical and organizational repertoires developed in independent theater helped to fashion scenarios of rights claims that found a platform at moments of political ferment.

Avant-Gardism in Art and Politics

The free theater manifesto movement launched in 1990 set the stage for an emergent Egyptian avant-garde on the margins of state theater, which built its repertoires at regular festivals. Formed through intergenerational collaboration, the manifesto claimed “a space of unauthorized theatricality”⁶² and ushered into being an independent, interstitial mode of making theater nationwide. Its path was marked by spectacular gestures and unexpected turns, highlighting the fugitive quality of an avant-garde that moved underground and emerged occasionally into the national spotlight. Its recognition by the state cultural establishment nevertheless brought into mainstream theaters new narratives of generational identity, which had once been limited to university and amateur stages. The movement’s success promised its new avant-garde theater a future beyond state institutions. There remained a particular symbolic value to performances at official sites of cultural authority, where independents played the part of prophets of the future of culture. Simultaneously, their less visible work to put in place an infrastructure of negotiation, contracts, newsletters, and festival protocols framed their legal claims to independent status within a respectably liberal tradition.

The festival model adapted from CIFET became the key frame for performances of cultural citizenship, allowing the independent theater movement to sustain its work across decades. The role of “youth of the theater” developed in the movement’s dramatic repertoires, which fashioned new genres of social critique. Independent dramatists still deployed deferential rituals—such as inviting senior officials to the opening night of festivals—to legitimize their critical gestures within respectable repertoires. However tactical these rituals of affiliation with state theater were, they carried the risk of co-opting the movement into state avant-gardes. Artistic independence often proved a utopian ideal in a military dictatorship, even for the handful of dramatists who won success in the state project of cultural democracy. The annual free theater festival staged democratic participation as a spectacle, but it was valued as a promise for the future nonetheless. The independent troupes’ cooperative labored to protect and extend it. Eventually their festival moved to the troupes’ new Rawabet Theater in downtown Cairo in 2006, funded by a combination of ticket sales and grants.⁶³ The foundational scenario of a theater festival that showed off the work of young dramatists, first seen at CIFET, gained a transformative edge when it moved into new times and places, allowing these dramatists to claim their mantle as pioneers of a new Egyptian avant-garde.

The performance repertoires of independent theater gradually transformed as troupes began working at more unofficial venues, such as the CFCC. In Diana Taylor's terms for thinking about the relationship between scene and scenario in a repertoire, independent dramatists reworked festival scenarios when they transposed these outside official state theaters.⁶⁴ Their festival rituals and dramatic genres presented independent dramatists both as respectable youth and as a dissident new generation of artists. Moreover, their development of independent theater as a fugitive cultural phenomenon extended the representational means of avant-garde performance in the aftermath of the festival. The mix of semiofficial theater festivals and underground performances in the late Mubarak era resonated with the partially visible intellectual worlds that Harney and Moten term undercommons. Like members of those intellectual worlds, independent Egyptian dramatists were always in danger of being conscripted into the regime's spectacles and institutions.⁶⁵ However, independent dramatists negotiated with different authorities and worked to keep their labor out of the appropriative reach of state power. Their self-regulated status produced renegade performances that sometimes resembled what Michel Foucault calls a "site of veridiction" within neoliberal regimes that allowed their subjects a controlled measure of freedom.⁶⁶ Activist episodes in the history of independent theater showed that such careful allowances of freedom did, however, have political effects. Theater makers in their twenties and thirties claimed rights in the mode of cultural democracy, even as they accepted limits to their independence. Their unexpectedly political gestures challenged narratives of national theater as a protectorate of the state and enacted repertoires of citizen leadership not yet available in political discourse.

John Conteh-Morgan argues that there is no clear divide between aesthetic and political radicalism in postcolonial theaters where citizenship itself is being reimagined. Such avant-garde theater is political "in the way it is practiced, organized, and conceived (often as a metaphor of creativity and renewal, both of self and community), in the way it enacts a vision of human relations, in the way, finally, that it functions as a model of culture and community."⁶⁷ In Egypt's independent theater, the alternation between sustained cultural activism and moments of political drama in 1990 and 2005 revealed the intertwining of avant-garde repertoires across stages. Their "model[s] of culture and community" played out in narratives of gender critique and generational struggle onstage. More intermittently, their models of organizing and making rights claims carried over from theatrical to political contexts. Avant-garde challenges to authoritarian institutions resonated across cultural spheres in the late Mubarak era. These critical repertoires of youth culture framed the future as a site of social change.

During the liveliest years of independent theater in Egypt (2002–6), the movement that began with a stirring civil manifesto settled into a placid rhythm of annual festivals. Its democratic gains were often pushed back by

the Ministry of Culture. A chronological historical narrative of independent theater thus reveals slow progress. Attending to the fugitive motions and rippling waves of free theater culture across Cairo's urban landscape offers a more dynamic view of this theater movement. My ethnographic observations at festivals and of organizational campaigns focused on both slow-forming repertoires and sudden political gestures, which show how the avant-garde grew both in space and time. Further, the performances I examine in the following chapters attest to a range of narratives of a new society, with respect to media, politics, and gender roles. By analyzing these collectively as avant-garde performances of citizenship, I seek to show how repertoires of cultural and political democracy coevolved within projects for the future of theater.

Chapter 3



Live from Cairo

Youth in the Time of New Media

In January 2004, scenes from the Iraq War played repeatedly across Egyptian television screens, evoking popular horror but no condemnation from official quarters. Then, Cairo's Hanager theater ended the artistic silence on the invasion with a new antiwar play. Opening-night crowds buzzed with anticipation at the revival of dissident politics on this semiofficial stage of experimental theater. The Haraka (Movement) troupe's performance took even the critical Hanager audience by surprise. A group of actors dressed as U.S. Marines burst in, waving fake guns and herding audience members (including me) into the theater with curses and shoves. Once inside, we found the wartime atmosphere replaced by familiar sounds from Egyptian television. The house was set up as a talk show studio, with warm lights and music, and a producer gave us instructions on when to applaud. It soon became clear that the play's title, *Al-la'b fi-l-dimagh* (*Messing with the Mind*) referred to how television manipulated Egyptians through political reporting and entertainment. But there was a twist: the regime (*al-nizam*) represented on television was a collaboration between an Egyptian producer and the American general of the occupying army. Over a three-hour extravaganza of skits and songs, the play dramatized a corrupt alliance between television networks, Egyptian elites, and foreign leaders. There was no nationalist hero. The prototypical citizen character was a young man seduced by the pleasures of satellite television.

Just weeks later, another independent production showed that satellite television was producing a crisis of Egyptian identity. Al-Ma'bad (Temple) troupe's *Mama ana awez aksib al-milyun* (*Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire*) dramatized the lure of *American Idol*-style talent contests for youth to whom the nation no longer offered traditional paths to a bright future. The opening scene of a classroom featured two students sitting through an outdated curriculum. "We want to concentrate on today's lesson, which is the first and most important lesson in the Arabic language: the letters of the alphabet," their teacher droned. Then the lights changed, and upbeat music took the boys to the livelier space of a television studio. Another patriarchal



Television presenter in *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire*. Courtesy of Ahmed el-Attar.

figure appeared: the male host of a singing contest in which thousands of young Arab men and women cast their votes for the contestants via text messaging and online voting. “Don’t forget that the winner, the champion you will choose, will win not one or two or five, but fifteen million pounds! It is you who will determine and choose and decide WHO IS THE CHAMPION!” Voting and performing in a youth-oriented show was alluring for the young characters, including the protagonist Hasan, who imagined an alternative biography through media. Yet his hopes came crashing down by the play’s end. Once again, the young man who should have been an icon of Egypt’s new cosmopolitanism appeared as a failed citizen.

The two plays about satellite television, and the new world order that it represented, staged an impasse of Egyptian citizenship in an era of cultural democracy without economic or political rights. Protagonists Ashraf and Hasan tried to play their own version of cosmopolitan youth, only to be manipulated by media machinery. Their failures offered unusually cynical views on whether young Egyptians could represent themselves through media. However, the runaway success of *Messing with the Mind* (and the transnational accolades for *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire*) showed that independent theater was well positioned to represent the crisis of Egyptian identity in an age of neoliberal globalization. The two 2004 productions analyzed the promise of media globalization through satellite television, then a

new phenomenon, in slow theatrical time. As they staged the youth culture generated around the media phenomenon for audiences, they demonstrated the absence of opportunities for self-representation under the Mubarak regime's policies. If anything, the new ideology of freedom through media covered up dismal political and psychological realities for the young people showcased on television. The embodied practice of self-representation was presented as more authentic in both plays. By bringing their knowledge of satellite television to stage, directors Khaled el-Sawy and Ahmed el-Attar staged impasses of youth citizenship grounded in the contemporary experiences of television viewers.

The Haraka troupe also included two television producers, Sayed Mahmoud and director El-Sawy. Their experiences of workplace dissimulation and their leftist politics brought them to devise the self-styled "political cabaret" about fake media images of freedom. It resonated widely at a time of discontent with the Mubarak regime's support for the United States' military action in a fellow Arab country. *Messing with the Mind* played to packed houses at the Hanagar for three months and won positive reviews from cultural critics across state and private newspapers.¹ Reviewers applauded the independent troupe for rising to the intellectual challenge of critiquing the Iraq War and even ushering in the rebirth of political theater.² Within the state cultural establishment, critics in search of nationalist icons downplayed the dark satire and embraced the patriotic hope that the show offered. National theater still had something to say about Egyptian identity, they enthused. The gesture of replacing television chicanery with more authentic representations of contemporary life won the pioneering independent Haraka troupe its biggest success to date.

The ironic success of plays with failed protagonists marked an impasse of recognition with which independent theater makers were familiar. They worked against triumphal representations of youth in new media, including satellite television, to depict flawed young citizens who embodied paradoxes of Egyptian liberalism without democracy. As subjects of a regime that offered rights to a narrow part of the population, these dramatists staged the struggle of regulating their desires for freedom according to norms of cultural democracy. The rousing performance of activism that ended *Messing with the Mind* contrasted with the lonely anger of the protagonist of *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire*, whose freedom to consume global media drove him to despair. The positive performance of citizenship in the former case resulted in a politicized drama that was well received at home. Meanwhile, the latter drama of alienation was hailed as a representation of the despair of Arab youth at the Berliner Festspiele.

Messing with the Mind and *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire* displayed disjunctures between the hopeful futures represented on Egyptian television and the contemporary lives of middle-class youth. The story of the alienated young man was a focal point for staging this disjuncture in each play. His

misguided faith in the new future promised by television pointed to a misrecognition of freedom, although his enduring hope helped him survive dark times. I analyze visions of the national future through two strands in each play: one of identity crisis, and the other of hope. Scenes that critiqued satellite television, and its representations of youth culture, sometimes aligned with nationalist attacks on new media by state-employed intellectuals. The performances also *produced* new cosmopolitan culture by refracting television narratives through avant-garde theater repertoires. These critical stagings approached new media without prior ideological binaries between national and foreign culture. Each of the performances analyzed here thus showed how theater in the era of neoliberal globalization itself mediated new media for middle-class audiences. Independent avant-gardists staged their experiences with media as part of an emerging youth culture.

As the independent theater movement developed new narratives of youth culture, it redefined the classic protagonist of modern Egyptian fiction, the young, middle-class man. This symbolically charged figure questioned his masculinity at a time when the parameters of youth, citizenship, and desire were all shifting. With the rapid privatization of education, and the spread of global media, national pedagogies of masculinity were replaced by subtler means of shaping the proper male subject. Formal institutions that molded identity were superseded by free-form mechanisms that modulated it.³ Multimedia theater examined the dialectic between mass media and the performing body through live performances that showed how media standardized identity in contemporary contexts.⁴ Media had specifically political implications in Egypt, where television was a privileged means of disseminating state ideologies of identity. Challenging satellite television norms of cosmopolitan citizenship in theater was thus an oppositional gesture. The ideology of media globalization as a means to liberal democracy was countered by staging the contemporary impasse of young masculinity and, by extension, contemporary citizenship.

The young protagonists of *Messing with the Mind* and *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire* struggled to act ethically in times of sexual and financial corruption. These characters built on familiar types in university theater, where dramatists honed the art of representing existential dilemmas. The alienated young man was also a prominent figure in Arabic literary drama, manifested, for instance, in Hamlet-like characters struggling to act against unjust power.⁵ Independent dramatists built on these available repertoires to fashion contemporary narratives that responded to moral panics about globalization by representing their generation in its own terms. In 2004, several Egyptian media commentators had sounded alarms about the mindless consumption of satellite television programming by youth, warning that cultural difference was causing psychic dissonance.⁶ Academics likewise argued that the new consumerism was producing a crisis in norms of Egyptian masculinity.⁷ Independent theater makers took up the trope of masculinity in crisis

and gave it a story. Thus they entered into debates on the future of masculinity in neoliberal times, as intellectuals representative of their generation and its historical experience.

The Haraka and Ma'bad troupes were formed in the university theater scene of the 1990s, and their male directors were well versed in staging youth culture in this period of accelerated globalization. Directors El-Sawy and El-Attar were now in their thirties, and they took a broad, generational view of the struggles of younger Egyptian men. Their respective positions, one as an employee of the Nile Television Network and the other as a well-connected, polyglot graduate of the American University in Cairo, also informed their perspectives on precarity in the generation that came of age amid economic reforms and widespread unemployment. Their reflections on contemporary youth centered on the analysis of freedom and its ethics. These dramatists saw that norms of good citizenship were changing in an era of economic transformation and investigated the shift in stories of young men and their desires.

Guarding Critical Culture in Neoliberal Times

In October 2003, El-Sawy began rehearsals for a play that was close to his heart, as a socialist who no longer had time for regular activism. He shot to fame as a film actor with his role as the eponymous president in *Gamal Abdel Nasser* (1998). While he earned his bread and butter as a television producer, he was also busy shooting Ramadan television serials, where his acting skills were in high demand. Yet he remained committed to sustaining the theater troupe he had founded as a law student at Cairo University. "The Haraka troupe focuses on political and social matters, and on comedy," he told me, emphasizing that its name, Al-Haraka (Movement), referred to both physical and political movement. As El-Sawy narrated his coming-of-age as "a leftist and a revolutionary" over beer in Cairo's radical-chic Estoril restaurant, I began to make sense of his combination of commercial success and outsider identity. His work for Haraka complemented the day job that enabled his Marxist ideals, and fed on his critical view of the institutions that paid his salary. "I don't compromise when I'm directing plays as I do when I'm acting. Directing belongs to your vision, while acting is technical," he asserted.⁸ Every two years, his troupe raised funds to produce a play or a film that conveyed its shared leftist vision.

Messing with the Mind germinated in the troupe's research into living conditions in Cairo after the acceleration of economic and media reforms it referred to collectively as globalization (*al-'awlama*). As a student, El-Sawy had written expressionist (*ta'biri*) plays on youthful alienation in literary Arabic, alongside his activism. Before spearheading the September 5 movement, he had been part of the National Committee for Students, the Lawyers'



Khaled el-Sawy (*left*) at a demonstration by Artists for Change, August 2005. Photograph by Sonali Pahwa.

Syndicate, and the Actors' Syndicate. "I work on the struggle, and art arises out of it—the art of resistance," he declared.⁹ In the current show, his theatrical and activist efforts converged. The Haraka troupe had made a decisive turn from expressionism to popular comedy as it began to seek audiences off campus. Its signature genre was now the satirical musical known in Syria and Egypt as political cabaret (*al-kabareh al-siyasi*). Moreover, the recent wave of antiwar protests in Cairo had persuaded troupe members that it was time for a political play aimed at mass audiences. El-Sawy claimed he got the idea for *Messing with the Mind* when he was out protesting the Iraq War. In his retrospective essay "The Experiment of *Messing with the Mind*," he wrote, "I called for the troupe to begin from the street, where at the first protest of the Iraq campaign we hung up the emblem of the troupe and gathered to go protest . . . then met afterwards to discuss it."¹⁰ By the autumn of 2003, the antiwar protests that had memorably filled Tahrir Square were gone, but the Haraka troupe reenacted scenes in theatrical skits.

The troupe's standing members included several television professionals, such as producer Sayed Mahmoud and actress Nermine Za'za. Their knowledge of how television studios worked fleshed out the story of *Messing with the Mind*, set in the studio of a fictional network called Democracy (Al-Dimuqratiyya). The actors pooled their experiences of corruption in state television to satirize the liberal reputation claimed by networks like Nile TV, which had recently

added satellite channels in English and French. Haraka troupe members also disseminated surveys and conducted interviews about economic reforms to supplement their own experiences of liberalization. The outbreak of the Iraq War added fuel to their critique of the new world order in which Egypt was allied with the United States, where trade and military ties superseded Arab nationalism. The fictional Democracy studio was the site of a panoply of social and economic changes that the troupe associated with the new liberalism. Whereas contemporary television presented these reforms as signs of Egypt's integration into a global economy, the stage play dissected globalization as a mode of ideology production. The Haraka dramatists improvised various skits about recent media and economic reforms within the frame story of television production, setting up a dialogue between institutional ideologies and personal experiences. Their Marxist style of critique positioned the dramatists as mediators of popular discontent and truth-tellers about the new economy as advertised by the ideological state apparatus of television.

Staging the play nonetheless required the cooperation of state theaters, as independent venues accommodated very small audiences. The Haraka troupe secured the prize stage of the state-owned Hanager for *Messing with the Mind*. Presenting the play as an antiwar drama made it more acceptable to Hanager director Hoda Wasfi than a play explicitly about corrupt state institutions would have been. With a foot in the door, the troupe guarded its critical ideas and artistic independence tactically. El-Sawy manipulated the censorship process, for instance, by inviting a large number of friends as witnesses to the dress rehearsal where censors were present. The ploy worked: about a hundred people came to that rehearsal, and the script was approved in full. And those who attended, mostly dramatists themselves, spread the word that the play was exciting. Haraka troupe members also did their own publicity. They went to the Cairo International Book Fair, which opened a few days before the show, and handed out flyers with a political statement: "We want to say no to American occupation, corruption, capitalist globalization, media fakery, and the Israeli occupation; so come and see the show and add your voice to ours."¹¹ Blending a familiar nationalist vocabulary with antiglobalization rhetoric, the statement hedged against the risk of political dissent. The dramatists' knowledge of the state cultural establishment, and its red lines, shaped their self-regulated repertoire of critical performance. I analyze the play along three strands: unmasking media ideology, staging ethical masculinity, and rehearsing revolutionary activism.

Unmasking Media Ideology

Television had an ambiguous presence in the lives of Cairo intellectuals, many of whom had day jobs as writers and producers there, but spoke of it as a

medium of mass culture and state ideology. The hulking Maspero building by the Nile, which hosted state television studios, was tellingly guarded by tanks and heavy security. Newer private networks located in Cairo's western suburbs poached personnel from state television and syndicated shows from Lebanese, American, and other foreign networks. When satellite television took over the airwaves in Cairo, few intellectuals saw media liberalization as an opportunity for greater democracy. Independent theater makers in particular saw television as their enemy, an ideology machine that produced polished entertainment without serious social critique. The Marxist philosopher Guy Debord's analysis of spectacle as a means by which "deceptive images mediate social relations among people" echoes the cynicism with which this community received liberalization in the media economy.¹² Yet satellite television had large audiences among youth, and the Haraka troupe decided to critique it as a newly hegemonic cultural phenomenon.

El-Sawy told me that the aim of *Messing with the Mind* was to replace "television reality" with "theater reality."¹³ The play's very title promised to unmask television reality as an ideological construct, showing the scripting of apparently live performances on talk shows and talent contests. This simple deconstructive strategy produced a complex, three-hour narrative that took apart not only satellite television but also a whole web of Egyptian media discourses that linked liberalized cultural production with political freedom. As such, the cabaret-style sketches of wartime television and domestic talk shows in *Messing with the Mind* formed a chain of gestures unmasking "television reality" as the ideological apparatus of the regime and its cultural democracy policies.

The format of a television talk show framed both the antiwar and domestic "youth dialogue" scenes in the play, its conversation managed by a stylish television presenter (*mudhi'a*) called Madame Nadia. Her blond hair and effusive style were typical of presenters on Egyptian satellite networks. "She is sharp-tongued but seems charming, smart though she plays dumb. She is always hiding her age and pretending to be the opposite of what she is," El-Sawy described the character. "She is the regime, and the system, not just a symbol."¹⁴ Played by television actor Nermin Za'za, Nadia embodied a stereotype of seductive middle-aged women. Her wiles enabled an unholy alliance with the American army, represented by General Fox. The feminized corruption of the Egyptian partner in the alliance contrasted with the naive figure of the American general, played by El-Sawy. In "theater reality," the liberation ideology that justified the Iraq War, with support from Mubarak's regime, was propagated by a transnational alliance and not just American political ambitions.

The political critique began, however, as a crowd-pleasing satire of U.S. policy in the Arab region. General Fox came in wearing fatigues, throwing hip-hop moves, and singing of his love for Egypt, its ancient history and street food. His charm offensive veered into lyrics that described America's war in

Iraq as an attack “for the sake of democracy.”¹⁵ Fox embodied the friendly face of American pop culture in Egyptian media, where it offered scenarios of youthful freedom. After the American response to September 2001, and the Iraq War, that image was changing. Now the United States distinguished between good and bad Muslims, and it sought support for its invasions of the latter’s states. The Egyptian regime’s ready compliance echoed Madame Nadia’s welcome to Fox as the “guest of all Arabdom.” She even invited him to hold forth on policies that would benefit the Arab world:

FOX: Look, Nadia . . . Arab youth are deep in my heart . . . fine youth . . . I ask myself . . . what do Arab youth want? What do they want? They want a bride [*‘arusa*].

(*Nadia laughs at his mispronunciation of the word and asks him to repeat it.*)

NADIA: Oh my goodness! So, General Fox, if we say the young Arab man does want a bride, what can Fox do?

FOX: Oh, Fox can do plenty!¹⁶

Moments later, Fox summoned his soldiers to bring onstage what he considered an *‘arusa*—misunderstanding the Arabic word by its secondary meaning of “doll.” A life-size, low-priced mannequin was his answer to the marriage crisis caused by unemployment in Egypt. This satire of misguided policies informing U.S. aid to Egypt, which presented import liberalization as an answer to the nation’s problems, was received well among an audience from the leftist intellectual milieu. Some audience members who were themselves theater makers were particularly struck by the staging of gender politics in the relationship between the United States and Egypt. Usually the corrupt *mudhi’a* was a misogynist trope of social corruption. Now she represented a regime in bed with American powers, her self-serving style matching that of General Fox.

Unmasking the collaborative ideology of U.S.-Egyptian alliance was a radical gesture enabled by the low-tech means of theater. Fox’s clownish friendliness and Nadia’s flirtation appeared onstage unpolished by television editing. The “theater reality” that El-Sawy fashioned used the simple satirical repertoires of youth theater. It produced scenes that touched a political nerve but remained safely within the sphere of carnivalesque comedy. *Messing with the Mind* was a studiedly unpolished version of the mainstream political cabaret genre, which used dance numbers and showy costumes to entertain as it instructed. By filtering television production through its youthful version of political cabaret, the independent play made media the objects of political critique. The combined use of leftist satire and misogynistic humor to skewer Egyptian and American authorities set the stage for critiquing the freedoms that neoliberal globalization offered to youth.

Ethics of Young Masculinity

Madame Nadia's fictional show *Wahashtuni (I've Missed You)* turned to youth dialogues after the opening political satire to demonstrate how youth interpreted liberal culture in new media. The talk show was an emerging genre on Arab satellite television, and the most popular ones were modeled on *Oprah* and *The View*. Their commanding hosts presided over debates on the social problems of women and marginalized Egyptian populations. Nadia's fictional talk show went further in discussing international politics as well. She was a feminized symbol of liberal state power, sympathetically concerned about the problems of young Egyptians. In the opening talk show scene, a young man named Ashraf was handpicked to represent the kind of youth that Nadia wanted to help. The handsome business student, in trendy clothes, came onstage to thank Nadia for her show. He repeated her statement that youth must work toward their own goals and not expect the government to "wipe their ass" as if it were a mother. Ashraf's performance of neoliberal economic values resonated with that of executives in corporate advertisements. Theatrical details like his westernized lisp and macho swagger made it slightly ridiculous onstage, however. Moreover, the sexual dimensions of his liberal identity fleshed out the dubious ethics of masculinity in the current age of globalization.

Ashraf's antiheroic persona was established at the outset, but his ethical conflicts were narrated to appeal to young audience members. Nadia invited him to talk about his romantic life, showing off her liberal standards, and he confessed that he did have a girlfriend.

NADIA: Wonderful! I want to say to our honored audience in the studio and on screens at home that this is a sign of health, that this generation is honest. A young man can tell his friend "I love your sister."

When Nadia pushed further, however, she discovered something scandalous that demanded censorship.

NADIA: So if the relationship is honorable what can the objection be?
 ASHRAF: But how can it be honorable, Madame Nadia, when young men are repressed and girls depraved?
 NADIA: I don't understand, truly, Ashraf!
 ASHRAF: Well . . . we "make love" and such.
 NADIA: You might commit a sin, you mean?!¹⁷

Not only did Madame Nadia's Arabic euphemism "commit a sin" (*tartakibu khati'a*) linguistically override Ashraf's English expression, but she also wrestled with her guest and covered his mouth to assert control over his unacceptable embodiment of freedom. She imposed a cut, grumbling that "this generation

is hard to understand and to rule over.”¹⁸ The brief scene affirming young love, brutally suppressed, showed the narrow constraints of liberal youth culture and self-regulation under this regime.

The manipulative tricks of Egyptian television returned to set the new liberalism on a more moral path. Madame Nadia brought a docile young man on the show after the cut, to embody her vision of modern ethics with conservative morality. The new guest, Ahmed, recited a comical list of pious dreams, including prosperity for Egypt, progress in his career, peaceful nuclear power, and a pilgrimage to Mecca.¹⁹ Offscreen, he was seen as an employee of Nadia’s television company. Her emasculation of young men in talk show scenarios showed her to be part of a patriarchy that enforced old-fashioned values. As an embodiment of the regime and its techniques of power, she demonstrated that sexuality was a key site of social control. The freedom of relations between young Egyptians were to be defined by state authorities, not wayward youth themselves. Deeming the object of her liberal policies incapable of self-regulation, the authority figure used censorship to uphold traditional values. Even Ashraf, who was eager to play the model citizen, found himself at an impasse before the regime’s contradictory policies on cultural and political liberalism.

Television and theater repertoires for performing ethical masculinity diverged further in the denouement of *Messing with the Mind*. Ashraf’s plotline took a melodramatic twist when it emerged that his lover, Intisar, was married to someone else. The polyamorous young couple symbolized a dark side of the new liberal culture, particularly when their story was picked up by a more salacious talk show. However, such behavior was part of a historical problem that “theater reality” was well positioned to represent. Intisar stated on her talk show appearance that her mother had been “clever and ambitious, and father’s only capital.”²⁰ The allusive statement was made in a side scene where the mother, a part-time sex worker, entertained Gulf Arab tourists while her father turned the child’s head the other way. This web of unorthodox sexual relations inherited from an older generation traced a link between the liberal opening (*al-infitah*) of the 1970s and the neoliberal globalization of the early twenty-first century. The play’s narrative showed the first to have emasculated middle-class men, while the second fostered a broader social collapse of sexual ethics. In the carefully censored talk show, there was little space for staging such underground histories. Despite their lip service to a youth culture of relative freedom, then, media authorities returned to uphold official history and patriarchal values.

Messing with the Mind used satire to stage the ethical contradictions of young Egyptian masculinity, caught between domestic patriarchy and policed opportunities for free expression. Performing on a liberal talk show provided no exit from this autocratic system. Moreover, the play debunked the idea that cultural democracy could offer a way out, as media and military powers cracked down on young characters’ attempts at acting on their identity

politics. While the highly regulated world of cultural production had few ethical options for youth, the dramatic narrative swerved to show that the sphere of activism did. In the last scenes of the play, alienated characters found opportunities for ethical citizenship in what was framed as a space of street politics. Instead of claiming illicit sexual freedoms, the motley cast joined in a community of patriotic solidarity. Their thwarted desires found recourse in a narrative that refused the seductions of media consumption and imagined a utopia where freedom could be claimed through collective action.

From Alienation to Revolution

The Haraka actors marked their shift from the symbolic freedom of television to real democracy through activist songs and chants. Their dramatic abandonment of theatrical narrative for political voice came after images of the invasion of Baghdad played on the video screen across the back wall of the stage.²¹ The gesture of interrupting the narrative with songs was classically Brechtian, and the Arab political cabaret genre was indeed influenced by the German playwright and theorist of alienation.²² *Messing with the Mind* produced a definitive alienation effect when newsreaders on its fictional television station fell silent before images of the war. The actors left their roles to form a chorus to one side of the stage, launching into an antiwar song made up of chants from the historic protests that took place in Cairo on March 20, 2003. The break in the dramatic narrative performed a refusal of tragedy. Now the show shifted to a new temporality, in which contemporary history was interrupted by utopian time. In the new narrative, the young citizen's voice rang as loud as that of the television presenter.

Several songs of the new repertoire of hope were old-fashioned socialist anthems. The chorus staged its call for Arab unity on the question of Iraq by singing about the pan-Arab project that Egypt had led in the 1960s:

We believed [singer] Sabah when she said simplicity, simplicity
 We even sold our clothes and slept together on the floor
 Oh you Americanized one, you urchin television
 We've had enough of your nonsense, you Sylvester Stallone!²³

The anthems with a marching beat, comparing cultural icons from Lebanon and the United States, gave the protest repertoire a nostalgic tone. Even in utopian time, the actors sang in nationalist voices. To some of my dramatist friends in the audience, these anthems were uncomfortably jingoistic. Yet old nationalist anthems were key repertoires available to would-be Egyptian revolutionaries. In the section of the play that could be read as the third and final act, the actors playing ethical citizens used these politicized repertoires to build a more hopeful narrative of the future.

How was political revolution imagined in 2004, when the Mubarak regime seemed destined to pass power from father to son? Protest scenarios from recent years, and songs from decades past, fashioned brief scenes of resistance in *Messing with the Mind*. The play required a narrative spur toward its conclusion, however, which political repertoires from the past did not provide. And so the troupe members devised a double ending. After a rousing scene in which a protester shot General Fox onstage, El-Sawy (playing Fox) stood up and offered the audience an alternative. “The resolution is not here onstage . . . the solution is with you,” he declared.²⁴ The play’s final anthem, with the refrain “the day will come,” told of a time when anger would fire up resistance to the status quo. El-Sawy’s concluding gesture of handing over the protest scenario to audiences pointed to a future when the avant-garde politics rehearsed onstage could run through the streets.

The play staged a break from a corrupt society with few ethical citizens, and imagined a revolutionary alternative, as a shift from media consumption to the production of a more independent and critical youth culture. The actors showed that beneath their cynical pragmatism as television professionals working in a corrupt system lay ample repertoires of dissensual performance. They had developed these repertoires in independent theater and antiwar protest, where they felt able to act more ethically than in their day jobs. Memories of recent street protests shaped their theatrical imagination of revolution. Moreover, historical repertoires of political theater, song, and poetry were key media for memories, techniques, and slogans of leftist nationalism in Cairo. All of these came together in the eclectic political cabaret. While these repertoires enabled the resurgence of political theater, however, they also constrained imaginations of revolution within proven nationalist scenarios. *Messing with the Mind* showed that interpreting such scenarios onstage could end up reproducing traditional norms of leftist politics, as the society of the future was grounded in the utopian nationalism of the past and present. It is little wonder, then, that the revolutionary politics of *Messing with the Mind* struck a popular chord with Cairo audiences.

Rewriting Neoliberal Futures

Messing with the Mind updated the genre of political cabaret to produce a performance that audiences deemed more radical than the usual musical. Showing how Egyptian satellite television stage-managed popular voice and desire was a novel strategy for critiquing an autocratic regime that claimed to promote cultural liberalism. After the darkly satirical sketches, the closing scene staged the transformation of the young characters’ struggles for freedom into anger and finally hope. Critics writing in newspapers and magazines lauded the “revolutionary aim” of *Messing with the Mind* and its political courage, arguing that the play revived an older style of leftist Arab

theater and song.²⁵ They also described it as a performance of return to lost political ideals. “The value of this play emerges at an epochal time in the history of the Arab nation, sleeping in fear,” wrote Muhammad al-Rifa’i in the weekly *Sabah al-Khayr*. “It pierces the passive state that has turned our minds into American commodities.”²⁶ Such approving commentaries affirmed that the play’s idealism aligned with that of older critics writing in mainstream (usually state-owned) newspapers. It was both revolutionary and familiarly nationalist.

My younger friends who watched *Messing with the Mind* considered its popularity a mark of its safe cultural politics. A cynical actor friend compared it to sixties agitprop, privately dismissing the hit play as a piece of nostalgia. Linking past and present narratives of Egyptian activism proved an effective strategy for framing contemporary struggles of educated youth within a narrative that audiences could recognize across generations, and gave the play wide appeal. At a time when glossy satellite television images of Arab youth elided realities of unemployment and disenfranchisement, the Haraka troupe showed that younger Egyptian intellectuals did have a critical vision for the future, which resonated with the leftist politics of their seniors. Their quest for recognition from that intellectual generation produced a revolutionary vision that eventually centered on familiar icons of ethical citizenship: a choir made mostly of men. They sang of a lost pan-Arab unity, while contemporary Egyptian activists focused instead on connecting the disenfranchised within the nation. El-Sawy was himself one of those grassroots activists. However, representing his revolutionary ethics in nostalgic terms was a strategy for appealing to institutional standard-bearers and inviting them to recognize the activist underground.

Despite the ambivalence that the hit political play engendered in independent theater circles, its provocative gestures were long remembered in this community. A notable barrier had been broken in criticizing state media producers and amoral politicians, and antiwar repertoires had been repurposed to protest a grim Egyptian present. The play’s suggestion of an alternative future to that of neoliberal globalization made it unusually hopeful for the late Mubarak era. The gesture of breaking from television ideology to write a new history was utopian. The performance of this alternative future remained possible in theater, as it was not in television, even after liberalization. *Messing with the Mind* brought such activist repertoires and revolutionary visions from avant-garde communities to large urban audiences over its three-month run in Cairo (and further weeks in Alexandria).

Theatrical narratives of Egyptian youth culture grounded the experience of economic reform in specific contexts, and slowed down its temporality to evaluate the phenomenon of media globalization beyond the idea that viewers simply imitated television icons. It showed that middle class men, in particular, struggled to reconcile their values with the liberalism idealized on television. By staging their thwarted quests for economic citizenship and

sexual adulthood, the Haraka dramatists showed the contradictions of economic liberalization from above, unaccompanied by new citizen rights. It was only by leaving the world of television for that of activism that young citizens could act with agency. In the second play I consider, the theme of false hopes raised by television played in a gloomier key. *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire* extended the theme of satellite television as a trope for fake liberalism in order to dramatize a young man's personal dystopia. The second play's multimedia genre made a stronger argument that neoliberal globalization was pervasive and inescapable. The respective futures of Egyptian neoliberalism staged in the two plays weighed the possibility of revolutionary change against that of worsening decline. Where the utopian hope of *Messing with the Mind* lay in political action, the neoliberal nation generated unshakeable psychological dilemmas in *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire*.

Dystopian Youth in *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire*

Ahmed el-Attar, the Ma'bad troupe's founder and director of *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire*, experimented with Western theatrical styles more boldly than others in the independent theater world. As a graduate of the elite American University in Cairo and an advocate for technology in theater, he was doubly removed from the Egyptian milieu in which low-budget art was the sign of a grassroots intellectual. El-Attar's multimedia theater was shaped by his years of work in France after receiving a degree in arts management from the Sorbonne. He remained a member of the independent theater movement as he moved between continents, and on returning to Egypt, he disseminated his style of theater through workshops in stage technology and, later, acting technique (see chapter 5). Networking with curators of international theater festivals, such as the Berliner Festspiele, which funded *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire*, El-Attar fashioned his brand of social realism through a repertoire of devised theater that offered alternatives to what he considered a restrictive Arab dramatic canon.

El-Attar's cosmopolitan style found a home in downtown Cairo, where he lived in a spacious belle époque apartment and held meetings in nearby cafés. We met at one of these in November 2003, when I interviewed him for a newspaper article on his workshops in lighting and scene design. I had seen posters advertising the workshops on the walls of a nearby sidewalk café. It emerged that the Swedish and Lebanese teachers of the workshops were working on *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire*, currently in rehearsals at the downtown Falaki Theater of the American University in Cairo. In his characteristic style of sharing resources, El-Attar took advantage of the technicians' presence in town to organize training sessions for interested amateurs. The soft-spoken man in his early thirties was among the few upper-class Cairenes who preferred downtown to the gated desert communities where the wealthy

now lived. He used his trilingual education to apply for foreign grants and gain access to the American University in Cairo's theater. His collaborative generosity gained him acceptance within the independent theater movement, and his class background gave him a critical distance from it.

The Ma'bad troupe consisted originally of students from the American University in Cairo, with El-Attar as their director from the beginning. Over the years, its professional budget and methods attracted the best of Cairo's acting talent, including film and television actors Ahmad Kamal, Salwa Ismail, and Sayed Ragab, now acting in their second play with Ma'bad. It retained the spirit of a student troupe, however. El-Attar explained that *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire* was intended as a play about "this generation, its dreams and illusions and realities." Focusing on the prosperous young Egyptians who were the target audiences of new media, he conducted research on youth culture by watching hours of satellite television shows like *Superstar* (a Lebanese talent contest). El-Attar's study of generational culture led him to believe that young Egyptians' cultural cosmopolitanism not only spanned a broader class spectrum than in his time but had in fact become a key part of their identity. "Real time is being transformed into cinematic time and space, and I explore its discontinuities in my play," he explained in English.²⁷ With his notion of a new temporality of culture in the age of globalization, El-Attar developed characters whose lives moved at different speeds.

The experiment with staging disparate lives in the age of new media encompassed television-obsessed young Egyptians of different class backgrounds, all of whom wanted to escape from reality. The protagonist, Hasan, was a familiar type: the conflicted middle-class young man. However, his story was disconnected from those of the other characters, just as they were from each other. El-Attar had the actors build their characters in separate monologues, which he then assembled into a narrative in a process that he described as being like film editing. The characters represented television viewers immersed in a language that none of them authored. And the nonlinear narrative resembled that of postdramatic theater, where dreamlike temporality replaces the progress of time.²⁸ The lack of forward motion meant that each of the characters was caught, like the alienated young protagonist, in a story without a future.

El-Attar asked the actors to improvise aspirational versions of their own social personas, who dreamed of winning a television talent contest. Each picked one personality trait and one physical gesture to define their characters. In the last month of rehearsals, which I attended, El-Attar had assembled their contestant scenes into a loose plot, framed by darker everyday scenes he had written. Hasan was the only character whose story ended conclusively. As the prototypical viewer of a satellite television singing contest, he represented the doomed hopes of young Egyptians who thought new economic reforms would lead to freedom and meritocracy. The film-like play

decentered the protagonist, however, so that all characters' dreams appeared as part of a grand national illusion. El-Attar's preference for technology-rich theater, including electronic music and video screens, produced a dramatic narrative that cycled between spatial settings more than it progressed forward in time.

The bi-level stage was split into cage-like metal frames, where characters alternately lived out everyday routines and performed for the *American Idol*-style talent contest. In the latter dreamlike space, they were stylish figures and accomplished performers. Only Hasan was excluded from the back-and-forth between quotidian and utopian time. As a more traditional dramatic character, he lived his life and tried to build relationships within a web of media content that visibly overwhelmed his bodily movements. Hasan's everyday life unfolded in slow, theatrical time, which accentuated his alienation from the exciting world of television. The play staged the experience of satellite television, for this youth, as one of attempting and failing to enter an economy of hope. Video cameras focused on Hasan's body and its misery, while gloomy lights and sound situated him in a static lifeworld. His alienation from the dreamworld of the television contest stood for the experience of many young Egyptians with media globalization.

Dreamtimes of Television

The opening tableau of *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire* saw six actors frozen in postures of hopeful supplication under white light while dissonant electronic music permeated a grim scene of waiting at the "Government Office." A similarly repetitive rhythm marked the opening stories of young men in the play. In the classroom scene, Hasan and his classmate Walid sat on chairs and repeated lines from a textbook after their teacher. As the Soldier, Walid repeated the Egyptian military pledge in a separate frame, enacting the ritual of young Egyptian men's entry into compulsory service. These spare scenes showed young men voicing public texts in a flow of speech where language seemed absurd. The actors had little affect to add to the formulaic scenarios of masculine aspiration, which trapped their bodies in rigid postures within the cage-frames.

Warmer lights and an upbeat electronic melody marked a transition from the dreary classroom to a television studio. Here the young students—and their teacher—devised lively performances for a singing contest called *Min huwa al batal?* (*Who Is the Champion?*). Their solo scenes of interviews for the camera, and brief song verses, showed three men and one woman performing in stylish clothes and unique musical styles. They were given a script on which to improvise: a classic Egyptian song by 1960s and '70s icon Abd al-Halim Hafiz titled *Ya khali al-qalb* (*O Heartless One*). As they gathered in a shared project of voicing the youthful love song, they gave a contemporary

interpretation to its sentimental vision of young desire, heard in lines such as these:

We would embrace our love, go far away
 From the eyes of the world, and all eyes
 If your heart loved as much as mine.²⁹

The male contestants of *Who Is the Champion?* interpreted Hafiz's song in different contemporary styles. Ramadan assumed a faintly thuggish persona, dressed like the working-class *sha'bi* (folksy) pop singer Shaaban Abd al-Rahim. The student Walid sang as a rapper, dressed in American-style clothes and using a smattering of English. His performance satirized the singer's hybridization of classic Egyptian song and modern hip-hop language with a startling reference to "the motherfucking moon."³⁰ Combining the roles of the Egyptian romantic hero and American star was a challenge, and Walid's performance showed that cultural globalization generated deep contradictions of masculine desire. He struggled in his interview to embody simultaneously an insouciant American selfishness and the role of the good Egyptian son.

When I become the champion, I'll have four bodyguards, chicks and dollars, Ferraris and Porsches, I'll take care of my body and appearance and clothes, my value and position. I won't give out my number and address to just anyone . . .

I have to become a champion, because my father is proud of me. I'll get my mother what she wants—a fortress on the sea, a villa on the Nile. And I'll spoil my sisters as I like. Because, in the end, one has only his family and relatives.³¹

Even in his fantasy, the young man struggled to balance demands of career success and family commitment. Walid's performances as a student, military conscript, and talent show contestant produced a rotation of roles without adding up to a single, successful persona. The disjuncture between these roles underscored the social pressures that fractured the young man's sense of the self to which he aspired.

The audibly different rhythms of the talent contest, classroom, and other spaces in *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire* sounded out diverging narratives of Egyptian youth identity in the age of satellite television. As the contest went on, the television producer announced its next stage in increasingly frenzied tones, with maniacal laughs and flashes of blinding lights. Its grand promises now appeared overblown.

More than a thousand young men and women applied from 15 Arab countries, over twelve months, each week you chose the winners who



Walid the hip-hop singer in *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire*. Courtesy of Ahmed el-Attar.

continued, and now it is you in whose hands rests the choice “WHO IS THE CHAMPION??”

Don’t forget that the winner, the hero whom you’ll choose, will win not one or two or five but 15 million—15 million pounds! It is you who will determine and choose and decide “WHO IS THE CHAMPION??”³²

The show encouraged young Arabs to participate in a contest that could make them millionaires, and it evoked livelier and more heartfelt performances than the classroom scenes. However, these were manipulations of desire on the part of media producers. They attracted viewers and made money, but ended up giving very few participants a materially better future. Yet the promise of meritocracy in the contest fostered hope among viewers like Hasan. His experience of the disjuncture between static everyday life and hopeful narratives of globalization showed the psychological (and potentially political) stakes of aspirational performance in the neoliberal era. Hasan’s inability to act on his desires led to a psychotic break and revolt against his reality.

The Trauma of Desire

Halfway into the play, Hasan spoke for the first time. He was seen watching satellite television passively at first, presumably absorbing its lessons.

Unshaven and affectless, he slumped in a chair while his words played in voice-over. At first, he tried on the role of the young lover, in flirtatious telephone chats with a young woman on another level of the stage. Hasan's first conversation with Du'a offered hope of a blossoming relationship:

Hello.
 How are you?
 Well, by the grace of God.
 What are you doing?
 Nothing.
 What will you do today?
 I don't know.
 I've missed you.
 Me too.
 I've missed you very much.
 Me too.³³

Hasan adopted a fantasy nickname for their second conversation. Taking the obviously fake name Al-Shatir Hasan, after the Egyptian fairy-tale hero, he performed the persona of a macho sportsman:

Miss Du'a?
 Yes, who is it?
 I'm Shatir Hasan.
 Hello. What can I do for you?
 Don't you know me?
 No.
 I'm the handball player.
 Really, what club do you play for?
 I play for the league.
 Then you must be a very good player. From where do you score your goals?
 From all positions. Where do you like to see goals scored from?
 I like goals from all positions.³⁴

Hasan was able to pursue his narrative of sexual potency only within this language of fantasy. The scene evoked internet chat rooms in which young Cairenes (in 2004) were able to conduct more adventurous conversations than on the phone. It was very much his own fantasy, however. After the foregoing scene, Du'a stopped responding to his flirtation. When Hasan called next, she said coldly that he had the wrong number. The audience saw that the young woman was now wearing an Islamic headscarf. Hasan's dream of acting on his desire had to account for the ethics of a society where love outside marriage was dangerously transgressive for women. The advent of global

media had not changed this, as young women's lives were still policed more strictly than those of their male peers. The play staged the gendered disjuncture spatially, showing the different worlds each inhabited at home. Hasan and Du'a could not perform the same script of legitimate desire beyond brief phone conversations.

The lives of young Egyptians were represented on satellite television as being full of opportunities for freedom and fun. Hasan's story showed, however, that cultural globalization elicited stricter forms of repression in Egyptian homes. Nor could the unemployed young man make a home of his own. His sexual frustration became a metaphor for an inability to act as an adult. Hasan sat bare-chested in a scene at a doctor's office, moving a probe around his torso while he recited symptoms of his depression. His body gave him no pleasure. Instead, he spoke about it as an inadequate instrument:

Failure.

Nothing I do succeeds.

Lost.

I don't know what I want from the world and don't see a purpose in my life.

Stupid.

I'm slow to understand what others get right away, and sometimes I don't understand at all.

Full of complexes.

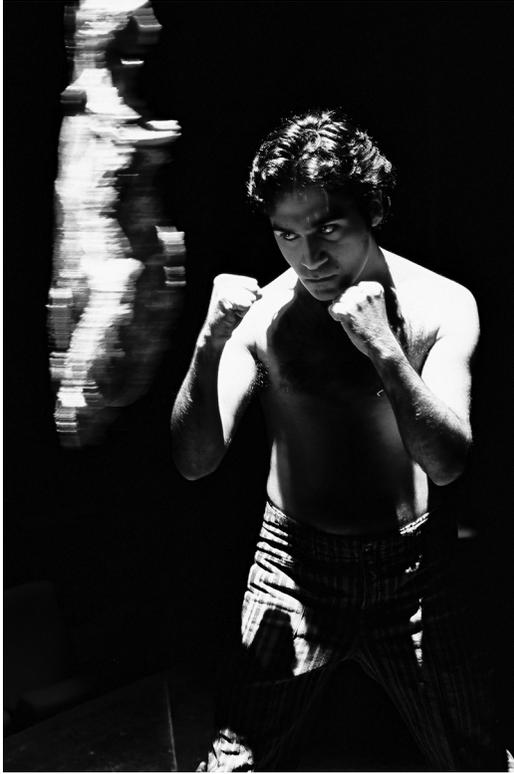
I always feel inferior to those around me, and whatever I do, I can't be like them.

Repressed.

I want to do many things, but can do nothing.³⁵

The language of depression in which Hasan voiced his struggle was commonly heard in the theater world. However, its ugly embodiment was new to the stage. As the play's protagonist, Hasan centered such alienation as a phenomenon of aspirational youth culture, no less than satellite television itself. The play's controversial ending implied that the gap between the upbeat new medium and slow-moving reality could even be psychologically dangerous.

Hasan rose from his chair at the play's end to act a scene in which he dressed as a talent contestant, sang a tuneless version of the prescribed song, and won first prize in *Who Is the Champion?* The music went atonal, and then silent, as the stage lights dimmed: Hasan was in a delusional dream. He stripped down to his shorts and assumed the stance of a boxer. A leg of beef was lowered from the ceiling and he punched it, launching into a tirade against all Arabs. With each jab at the meat, he said he hated Iraqis, Syrians, Libyans, and so on. His rant climaxed with a final violent jab as he snarled, "And I hate—hate—hate the Egyptians!" As he lashed out against a symbol of his fleshy physicality, which could not adapt to the new order, his anger



Hasan fights a leg of beef at the end of *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire*. Courtesy of Ahmed el-Attar.

was directed at his own country. The legs of beef that hung at local butcher shops also became symbols of wealth as food prices rose in Egypt. Hasan's fury sent drops of blood from the meat into the front row of the audience.

The concluding scene staged a violent claim to agency as Hasan's body revolted against its meaninglessness. The desperation of his final gesture, so unlike the hopeful song at the end of *Messing with the Mind*, was similarly a claim to voice. Its political message was more ambiguous. Hasan's performance as a self-hating middle-class man created a figure rarely seen in contemporary Egyptian theater: that of a failed citizen who voiced anger against the nation itself. It was more politically expedient to make statements against globalization or the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Such a bold statement could likely not have been made outside a protected space like the American University in Cairo. Even at this training ground for Egypt's elite, the play hinted, national identity was thrown into dangerous confusion. The Egyptian stories sutured together in this theatrical space failed to reconcile the liberal promise of new media with an oppressive social reality.

Reimagining Citizenship in an Age of Globalization

At the reception after the opening performance of *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire*, an invited audience of dramatists, academics, and critics buzzed with confusion at the play's nihilistic ending. The friend with whom I attended was disappointed that the high production values of the show framed such grim content. Even this sophisticated crowd expected a play about youth to gesture at a hopeful path out of the current sociopolitical impasse. Francophone critic Menha el-Batraoui criticized the ordinariness of the language in the script, which she described as "a sampling of the parameters of quotidian inanity in all domains."³⁶ Even *Al-Abram Weekly's* unfailingly supportive Nehad Selaiha wrote, "The significant scarcity of dialogue and predominance of hectoring, speech-making and monologues in *Mother I Want to be a Millionaire*, deepen the gloom."³⁷ The use of elaborate stage technology more than verbal artistry troubled viewers who looked for a language they could embrace and a protagonist who represented them. Young male heroes conventionally embodied an aspirational vision for the national future, after all. The cynical Hasan deflected any such emotional investment. His persona instead showed the dystopic side of urban youth culture, where depression and drug abuse were as much a part of life as dreams for the future. Staging this subculture through the voices of young characters, and embodying its darker dimensions in the protagonist, provided an unusual example of the failed citizen in independent theater.

As new-generation dramatists worked to dismantle the theatrical repertoires they had inherited, the convention of the young male hero as model citizen proved difficult to abandon. *Messing with the Mind* countered its antihero with a collective of ethical actors. The plot of *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire* offered no such gestures of hope in the absence of a hero who represented legitimate dreams for the future. Arab and Egyptian novels offered many examples of the alienated young man, but their narratives typically affirmed his moral high ground. At a time of media globalization, ethical Egyptian role models were desired, as critical responses to the plays made clear. But neither of the plays could offer more than a negative hero, who showed how his society failed ambitious youth. In theater, unlike novels, the embodiment of dystopian youth and traumatic desire fashioned a narrative of failure that directed blame uncomfortably at an older generation.

Reviewing both television-themed plays in an article for popular weekly *Ruz al-Yusuf*, Wa'il Lutfi commended their "sharp and ironic satire of our Arab society, which evokes tears." He compared them favorably with European classics such as *Hamlet*, recently revived at the National Theater, noting that *Messing with the Mind* and *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire* were "particular to us and speak of us, not of the piano or cherry orchards or the cares of some Dane!"³⁸ The respective contributions of these plays, for the critics, came in their representations of contemporary youth identity. *Mother*

I Want to Be a Millionaire did so negatively, and only a handful of Egyptian critics appreciated its style of avant-garde critique. Meanwhile, *Messing with the Mind* won wide praise for staging repertoires of vigorous young desire and active citizenship, despite private criticism from young viewers who found its nationalism old-fashioned. Even a columnist for the *New York Times* described *Messing with the Mind* as a sign of the rise of anti-American Arab nationalism.³⁹ The impasse of avant-garde theater was clear in critical responses to the two plays: political critique veered into nationalism, while cultural critique ran the risk of sounding hopeless.

The challenge of representing ethical Egyptian citizenship at a time of domestic dictatorship and economic globalization was keenly felt by independent dramatists who rejected each of these policies. Even after *Messing with the Mind* became an unexpected hit, El-Sawy wrote an introduction to a script of the play, published in an online journal, that clarified his independent stance and disavowed the nationalist politics that several commentators attributed to him. He had struggled to distance his vision from that of Ministry of Culture officials, who took credit for funding the play via the Hanager. “The Hanager is proud of being a semiliberal institution that grew on the margins of the Ministry, but we should not forget that an important reason for its formation was to extend the shadow of the government,” he wrote.⁴⁰ El-Sawy’s uncompromising refusal to ally with the Hanager put him at odds with some colleagues in the Haraka troupe. His reflection described the conflicts this produced, which ended with the troupe disbanding two years later. When welcomed into a national canon of which they were critical, independent dramatists found themselves fighting to retain authorship of their dissident narratives.

El-Sawy’s statement attempted to rescue the play from political domestication, as he described its success among more radical audiences than the establishment journalists who praised it. *Messing with the Mind* played next at the theater of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. “We collected our pamphlets and distributed them to all the youth groups in Alexandria,” he wrote, “and we circled the city in a car hung with invitations.” Returning to the environs of students and activists, the troupe reasserted its independent identity. Moreover, he emphasized that *Messing with the Mind* faced opposition in official quarters. Egypt’s television censor, for instance, had not approved the recorded show for broadcast. Meanwhile, the troupe participated in the Mediterranean festival at Milan’s Piccolo Teatro in November 2004, where the play was reportedly a success. “Italian and Arab youths held the Palestinian flag in the hall on the fourth night, and there was a wonderful conference . . . where people asked with great enthusiasm to join the international front for the resistance of imperialism and capitalist globalization.”⁴¹ El-Sawy’s leftist politics, underscored by the Rosa Luxemburg quote used as the epigraph of *Messing with the Mind*, made this recognition as welcome as the applause of Egyptian audiences.⁴²

The quieter critical response to *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire* showed that anger and other negative social affects fit uneasily within youth repertoires that celebrated hope. As independent troupes like Haraka and Ma'bad developed avant-garde theater for their time, they adapted available theatrical genres (such as political cabaret) to reconceptualize youth outside progressive national time. Yet young male protagonists and their quests to achieve adulthood continued to represent hopeful futures, whether by returning to socialist values or finding romance. The failures of these protagonists showed where the temporalities of quotidian life and utopian future could not be reconciled. Moreover, they showed how difficult it was to stage youth outside a vision of the social future. The young citizen in the neoliberal era was still part of a nation and its history.

Regulating Masculinity in Neoliberal Theater

Staging failed performances of masculinity was a way for independent dramatists to represent how youth struggled to achieve desires either for global consumerism or for national cultural authenticity. As independent dramatists themselves navigated the contradictions of leftist and neoliberal citizenship, they came to question performance repertoires associated with iconic male protagonists in Egyptian drama. The character of a hypersexual or impotent man in their plays staged the impasse of masculinity produced by shifts in state ideology. Disidentifying with the option of either the good or the bad masculine subject, young avant-gardists often questioned the symbolic valence of male desire in conventional dramatic narratives. Their alternative narratives of thwarted aspiration, which featured mental illness or sexual frustration, were controversial with older critics and popular audiences. However, struggles to regulate sexuality and other forms of bodily desire were crucial indexes of social dysfunction in a neoliberal era. The life politics of young male characters were particularly revealing barometers of contradiction within nationally authorized identity politics in the late Mubarak era.

The struggles of masculinity under autocracy have occupied many Egyptian theater makers, whose protagonists' quests for ethical lives often ended in tragedy. In Margaret Litvin's history of Arab *Hamlet* adaptations, we see generations of dramatists reimagining the scholar-prince as a symbol of their struggles with authoritarian regimes.⁴³ Some contemporary Egyptian dramatists continued to use canonical texts, such as *Hamlet*, as frame tales for reimagining masculinity. The subjects of my case studies in this chapter were unique for their ambitious strategies to overhaul the symbolic repertoires in which masculine identities were narrated. El-Sawy and El-Attar built contemporary male protagonists by quasi-ethnographic means, drawing on language and narrative forms from media and their paratextual culture. At a time when youth were immersed in different media, produced at home and

abroad, their identity politics engaged with more than classic Egyptian narratives. The multimedia plays re-created the effect of the hybrid and pervasive cultural forms that interpellated youth at this time. Their stories of alienation played not as tragedy, then, but rather in the mode of exclusion from desired worlds at home and abroad. The postdramatic form of *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire* staged a more extreme version of youthful alienation, from everyday as well as media language, “calling the very bases of everyday communication into question.”⁴⁴

Approaching satellite television in each play as a metaphor for regime ideology, as El-Sawy suggested, I read the protagonists’ psychosexual rebellions as forms of resistance against the domestic and foreign powers that made outlandish demands on Egyptian youth. Caught between respectability politics and illicit self-indulgence, they modulated informal, often precarious, modes of performing liberal masculinity. In this respect, the protagonists resembled independent dramatists who cobbled together livelihoods and found their freedom in theater. To come into full citizenship, in this context, often meant departing from the norms of an older generation for which marriage and employment were prerequisites for adulthood. The dark stories of the young protagonists staged the real risks of rejecting these social norms. At the same time, they introduced the earthy language and ethical conflicts of recognizably contemporary characters into a theatrical repertoire where these were scarce. Theater about television was a postdramatic genre of alienation from official language.

As the independent theater movement shifted away from the norms of official avant-gardism, its politics of desire grew more complex. Yet heteronormative masculinity stayed at the center of independent theater, and young men endured as icons of representative citizenship. The symbolic weight of male protagonists meant that their sexual politics attracted particularly critical scrutiny. Could these politics shift by decentering male desire as a metonym for national hope? Several female theater makers developed innovative new genres of performance that attempted to remake avant-garde norms. Their narratives of generational identity from the perspective of women made up a small but celebrated part of the independent avant-garde. Given the paucity of Egyptian drama with central female characters, women directors were relatively unburdened by canonical expectations when they staged their stories. Folk narratives, translated texts, and modern dance made up the eclectic repertoire of “women’s theater.” In addition to bringing different biographies into the world of theater, woman-centered troupes also imagined social change in more modest ways. Their gendered performances of generational dissent staged revolutionary change not just in a different future but also in an equitable present.

Chapter 4



Making Women Matter in Avant-Garde Theater

Women directors were renowned for making a particular splash at Cairo's independent theater festivals. They took the proscenium stage and turned it into new space, as seen in Mirette Mikhail's dance theater piece *Details* (*Tafasil*) for the Centre Français de Culture et de Coopération (CFCC) festival in 2004. A spotlight narrowed on the actor, creating an intimate version of the stage to represent a bedroom where she read Marguerite Duras's novel *The Lover*. The autobiographical show told how Mikhail took refuge from an oppressive city in dance and fiction and found herself. At the Independent Theater Festival in July, Abeer Ali's Misahharati troupe told women's stories in a diametrically different genre. The performers of *Harem Tales* (*Hikayat al-haramlik*) set up their chairs in a rural Egyptian storytelling circle (*samir*), and two young women in black sang the folk ditty "For Whom Do You Sing, O Pigeon?" ("Bitghanni li min ya hamam"). A female storyteller in an embroidered *galabiya* then began narrating a fairy tale to frame the feminist revue of stories and songs. Each of these prizewinning performances made a place for women at theater festivals by fashioning worlds that looked beyond the spaces represented in mainstream plays. In order to center their stories, the women directors found it necessary to hybridize performance genres and represent subaltern spaces in an avant-garde vein.

Given a striking lack of stories about women in Egyptian (and Arabic) dramatic literature, independent women directors grew accomplished in building theatrical worlds by drawing on outside repertoires. Ali's troupe collected oral histories and texts, Effat Yehia used translated American drama, and Nora Amin interpreted her own autobiographical novels for the stage. Their staging of other worlds than the modern city included feminized spaces like the home and the storytelling circle. Women directors' efforts to represent these worlds on Cairo stages ended up bringing marginalized performance genres, such as dance and storytelling, into the mainstream of independent theater. Their neofolk and dance theater performances expanded the repertoire of avant-garde forms within the "experimental" canon. By building new genres, these performances turned debates on representing women in theater into larger questions of representational practice. What did it mean to stage

Egyptian stories in their plurality? How did texts from outside national dramatic literature help to represent people not yet recognized as citizens with full rights? The women onstage at independent theater festivals embodied answers to these questions, making claims to self-representation in subaltern voices.

In Arab postcolonial performance, women's genres frequently signified sites of indigenous authenticity within webs of transnational culture.¹ Twentieth-century Egyptian novelists and cultural historians likewise figured the nation as a woman.² A symbolic link between femininity and national cultural authenticity lingered in the association of women with folk and belly dancing in contemporary Egypt.³ Feminist performers had thus to respond to a double demand of authentic yet cosmopolitan narratives for women. One strategy for doing so was to build hybrid repertoires that staged women's lives across home and the world. The neofolk repertoire of the Misahharati troupe echoed that of Cairo's pioneering feminist storytelling collective, the Women and Memory Forum (Multaqā al-Mar'a wa al-Dhakira). "We are a group of researchers interested in reading Arab cultural history from a perspective that takes into consideration the cultural and social construction of the two genders," the forum's mission statement declared.⁴ The academic members' sophisticated feminism relied on folksy storytelling to create a cultural repertoire that carried over into popular circles. They narrated rewritten fairy tales from their collection in a show, *The Storyteller Said* (*Qalat al-rawiya*), that they performed in schools and community centers. Theater makers similarly fashioned strategic hybrids between the world of folk culture, considered authentic but primitive in the avant-garde, and that of feminism, which many avant-gardists considered a Western import. They performed womanhood as a site of cultural connection between worlds. Recoding authenticity as a quality of voice rather than culture, their performances developed an avant-garde aesthetic that signified organic feminism.

The character of the storyteller embodied this voice. She proliferated in the songs and stories of *Harem Tales*, which were narrated by a single wise woman and then a host of modern voices. And she was embodied by the author of the autobiographical show *Details*. As in other theater traditions, the storyteller served as an intermediary between worlds. "She embodies the locus and means of communication," Diana Taylor describes the truth-telling Mexican storyteller.⁵ This storyteller's Egyptian counterpart similarly countered the power of official history with authentic experience. The woman's body and voice grounded her narratives in quotidian, local space. By deploying storytelling, then, Ali and Mikhail claimed recognition for their performances as contributions to an authentic feminist genre. Their implicit argument was that an abundant Egyptian repertoire of feminist material could be found once different voices were included onstage. While feminism remained controversial in intellectual circles, the process of uncovering an unheard, private world onstage compelled theater audiences. The performers' strategically essentialist

use of women's spaces—the harem and the bedroom—framed Egyptian feminist theater as a genre of intimate realism.

Feminine voices were woven into these performances by using texts gathered through ethnographic research, autobiographical writing, and translation. The women's repertoires that performers brought to the stage were a strategic mix of Egyptian and translated stories about family, home, and nation. Expanding traditional storytelling repertoires through intertextual linkage was a time-honored strategy by which guardians of folk culture added new material to familiar genres. Leaving broad intertextual gaps between the texts marked these feminist performers' new material as intentionally innovative.⁶ Their intertextual strategies thus made these plays novel contributions to the Egyptian avant-garde, built from outsider corpora of folklore or translated literature. Hybridizing genres also enabled female performers' bodies to be viewed onstage outside the distorting lenses of traditional literary drama.

In an avant-garde with limited means for centering women as authors, Ali and Mikhail fashioned genre frames in which women could speak and act with authority. The folksy (*sha'bi*) repertoires that signaled national authenticity in Cairo theaters, and the contemporary dance (*al-raqs al-mu'asir*) made fashionable after the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre (CIFET), each offered strong roles for women. By virtue of being historically considered "not theater," these were feminized performance traditions in which women played central if prescriptively decorative roles. Appropriating their repertoires for feminist purposes was a calculatedly risky move: directors could be assured of audiences for work in feminized genres, but it came with conventional expectations. The task of their performance, what Elin Diamond calls "feminist mimesis," was to use conventional genres as mutable frames through which to make visible and question the relationship between representational apparatus and practice.⁷ My Egyptian interlocutors approached such mimetic strategies with more caution than their feminist peers elsewhere, since their position in the avant-garde was more precarious. Lacking an archive of woman-centered drama, they constructed their own expansive feminist repertoire. They took advantage of the fashion for hybrid genres in the experimental wave to foreground women's voices through mixed strategies of representation.

In the scenes that I examine in the following sections, I evaluate the feminist possibilities of intertextual hybrids across foreign and folk repertoires. Women directors who used these outsider texts claimed the authority that they offered, with relative freedom from masculinist norms of authorship. Their alternative repertoire of critical voices, built with marginal texts, offered a rich model for performance practice outside state institutions and their majoritarian culture. By assembling a new corpus of texts to represent women's voices, feminists centered outsider voices in the independent avant-garde. Their techniques for evoking such voices through sites of alterity

expanded the representational terrain of the avant-garde as its performance territory grew.

Scenarios of Womanhood in Literature and Dance

Mikhail studied ballet as a girl, like many bourgeois Cairo women, and associated it with learning proper feminine comportment. The twenty-seven-year-old dancer now used this training to choreograph musical numbers for commercial theater productions and teach at the Modern Dance School on the opera house campus. When I first met Mikhail, however, I found her persona intriguingly unlike that of the opera house ballerina. With her natural curly hair and fondness for cigarettes and urban walks, she was a familiar downtown type of independent woman, and an age peer to whom I gravitated. She spoke about her transition from ballet to contemporary dance as part of her coming-of-age as a feminist. “Discovering contemporary dance was a kind of self-revolution for me,” she explained. “It showed me all the inheritances that shape the female body.” After moving with her family to the Gulf, then coming back to Egypt for college, Mikhail realized she was no longer interested in dancing Western “ideas, myths, and legends.”⁸ She wanted to learn a style that let her tell her own stories. Encountering contemporary dance through a chance workshop with an American dancer visiting Cairo, she found a suitable medium for her autobiographical narrative.

With her interest in storytelling, Mikhail found a spiritual home in avant-garde theater rather than the dance world. She befriended independent dramatists at the Hanager and choreographed the ensemble movement scenes for the 2003 CIFET show *Masks, Fabrics, and Destinies*. After teaching a class at the dance school, she often sat at the outdoor cafeteria of the Supreme Council for Culture next door. She read in English and French, as well as Arabic, and one day, I found her leafing through a thick photocopied text. It turned out to be the Arabic translation of Duras’s autobiographical novel *The Lover (L’Amant)*. She had underlined within the text “lines that resembled” her,⁹ as she worked on her own text of coming of age, inspired by the young Duras. Mikhail’s story of womanhood was inspired by working with her friend Nora Amin, also a translator and interpreter of Duras. She realized a French text would also give *Details* an edge within the French cultural center’s festival. And so Mikhail built a hybrid apparatus of translated text, dance, and monologue to carry her coming-of-age story from the world of contemporary dance into that of avant-garde theater.

Mikhail formulated a verbal language for her story through textual collage. The eventual script she assembled, interweaving Duras’s novel with her own autobiography, consisted of just two dense pages in tiny print. In rehearsals, which lasted about a month at the CFCC theater, she interpreted the text fragments in a surprisingly long sequence of dance and storytelling

scenes that staged the landscapes of memory the text called up. Mirette was emboldened to see this as a story that extended beyond her own experience after reading other texts in the coming-of-age genre. "It was very difficult for me to go on stage and speak my words," she confessed. Talking about female sexuality was particularly awkward, and she borrowed Duras's lines to do so. The translation had the advantage of being in the formal register of literary Arabic (*fusha*), which other Egyptian women preferred for scenes of romance and sexuality. Poet Iman Mersal, for instance, wrote autobiographically in *fusha*, with literary locutions conveying desires that might sound shameful in colloquial language.¹⁰ This technique for finding authoritative language for women's stories was used in literary theater as well. At a panel of the 2004 Cairo International Book Fair celebrating the publication of a translated volume titled *Nusus min al-masrah al-nisa'i* (*Texts from Women's Theater*), a group of directors and critics noted that translation addressed a major absence in Arabic dramatic literature.¹¹ Some panel members had adapted these texts, and they argued with a young man in the audience who asserted that Western plays could not apply to Egyptian women's lives. They saw these texts as flexible means of staging stories that otherwise went unrepresented.

Translating Duras's 1930s story into a contemporary Cairo milieu entailed creative adaptations of the narrative. Mirette first excised references to colonial Vietnam, the setting of *The Lover*, in her selection of lines from the novel. Then she fashioned a distinctly personal home space onstage, with projected slides of drawings she had made and photographs of herself as a teenager. She described *Details* as "a kind of visual theater, in which [she] had to let the body say certain things" as the performance burgeoned beyond its text.¹² The lighting design, by fellow director Hany El-Metennawy, created shifting moods and spaces on the tiny stage. Its homelike space framed her translation of the French novel while highlighting the difference between original text and new context. It was important to Mikhail to perform a local woman's world, down to the self-portraits and colloquial Egyptian lines, so she would not be accused of imitating Western feminists. But she struggled to find the right everyday embodiment. At first, she wanted to wear jersey pants, as she would for dance, but El-Metennawy persuaded her to perform in a "more everyday" skirt and sweater. Representing onstage the modern feminine persona she inhabited so comfortably outside the theater required careful performance strategies. The dramaturgical advice of friends helped to turn her experiences of reading novels, writing autobiography, and performing contemporary dance into a representational repertoire for feminist theater. Her translation of autobiographical text was thus a process that involved multiple moves toward a space and language sufficiently Egyptian that her cosmopolitan Cairo audience would recognize her story as part of their world.

Staging Freedom of Movement

Young women who wanted to walk alone in Cairo often experienced uncomfortable surveillance, ranging from unwanted comments to physical harassment. The opening scene of *Details* enacted the protagonist's move from the street to safer space as a preliminary to performing. A lone spotlight illuminated an open book onstage, and Mirette strode in angrily. She spoke in the dark about how she hated to be followed by men. Coming into the light, she said, "A woman who has a body like mine must be terrified."¹³ At home, she was more comfortable—and the stage allowed her to act with protected freedom. The open book on the floor showed she moved more freely through the world of literature, and claimed the right to expressive embodiment in dance.

Mirette's taut, angry body conveyed more confidence when she interpreted translated lines from Duras's novel. She used simple contemporary dance moves for the literary text, and straightforward storytelling for her own lines of autobiography. Her weaving of personal and translated text framed the dancer's space of self-representation as one assembled from diverse scripts of identity, each of which she used as an alternative to patriarchal social rules. Three extracts of translated text Mirette borrowed from the novel show how intertextuality helped her build a frame for representing a young Egyptian woman who desired to escape home:

I'm wearing a dress of real silk, but it's threadbare, almost transparent. It used to belong to my mother . . . She gave it to me. It's a sleeveless dress with a very low neck. It's a dress I remember. It suits me.¹⁴

My mother is a lonely woman. She lives out tragedy in all its dimensions. As if she were speaking in a barren desert. All her life, she has been seeking someone to whom to tell what had happened to her.¹⁵

The time has now probably come when she can no longer escape certain duties toward herself. And that her mother will know nothing of this . . . she's excluded from the family for the first time and forever. From now on they will no longer know what becomes of her[.] That is their fate henceforth. It's already enough to make you weep.¹⁶

The first extract was accompanied by projected photographs on the wall, of a hand sketching a woman, then of a dress. For the second extract, Mirette played the mother, sitting silently in a chair with ankles primly crossed. Finally, she danced with her male partner Amir to the voice-over of the text about leaving her mother's prohibitions behind. Their duet of approaching each other, then swinging apart, staged the back-and-forth of intimacy between the woman and her lover in less explicitly sexual terms than in the

text of Duras's novel. Finally, the woman jumped into the man's arms in a gesture of trust, and he carried her offstage.

The spare dialogue allowed Mikhail to stage evocative dance scenes about the relationships she said were key to shaping a young woman's sense of self: those with "her loneliness, her mother, and her lover."¹⁷ Her own words about these experiences were brief and, as she said, difficult to voice in public. The translated lines allowed her to frame her story within a more respectable literary text. Duras's novel was particularly useful in this regard for offering a rare negative depiction of a mother. The girl embodied her loneliness as an imitation of her mother, then disidentified with it. Onstage, Mirette calibrated her distance from her inherited feminine comportment, and the emergence of a more distinctive self, through a dance of detachment and attachment. After this physical transition, she found a space from which to speak more easily. Now she sat on a chair and played with her hair, speaking of her body in her own, colloquial lines: "I want to embrace you . . . I have long arms that feel bored. I open them apart and then close them again to feel the empty space. Why do I feel that everything is simple and that I'm merely a small creature who can fit easily into your hands?"¹⁸ The feminine body that Mikhail's embodied translation produced shifted between the registers of dance and plain speech. The second, realistic mode caused her some angst in rehearsal. In one storytelling scene, she spoke her lines while sitting with a leg hooked up on the chair and lighting a cigarette. It was a pose familiar to her, but she confided to her lighting designer that she was worried she might "look like a prostitute" if she smoked onstage.¹⁹ Too much realism risked alienating audiences more comfortable with the stylized body of a woman dancing onstage than with one who smoked and spoke about love. She used the distancing mechanisms of translated text and stylized contemporary dance to maintain a gap between role and self but eventually went ahead with the realistic scenario. The frame of a French text provided enough cultural distance to protect it from criticism.

Using a translated text to stage controversial identity politics was a familiar strategy in Cairo's independent theater world. Politically critical dramatists often adapted European drama to voice bold ideas through characters that belonged to other places. Translators tended to render foreign texts in a particularly ornate and foreign-sounding register of formal Arabic, creating an effect of distance from the here and now. However, Mikhail's use of intertextual gaps and separate bodily styles for each textual register exploited the foreignness of the French text strategically to build a genre frame around her autobiographical voice. The contrast between elliptical lines borrowed from Duras and her own simple text set up a hybrid linguistic register. It framed the emergent mimesis of the young woman's story, in which the actor assumed her character gradually, showing the process by which she came into her voice. Making the translation process visible served a double purpose in *Details*: it allowed Mikhail to distinguish her voice from the foreign text and

to narrate how dance theater helped her find her truest, most expressive body. At the end of the performance, she gestured at closing the gap between role and self with autobiographical statements about coming into her own.

After scenes of dance that moved between home and the world, the final minutes of the show focused on intimate details of Mikhail's own story. Her narrative of moving from an angry public body to the more comfortable dancing body was also a story of distancing herself from family and embracing sexual love as a claim to personal happiness. As the actor settled into her theatrical home, made up of a chair, a lamp, and artwork, she began to speak in an unpoetic, everyday voice: "Here I am, completely naked. I find myself baring my body time and again and standing like this. Now I am able to see myself clearly."²⁰ While fully clothed onstage, the actor spoke of facing herself confidently in the mirror of her space of memory. She was finally able to recognize herself. It was striking to hear a young bourgeois woman speak so frankly about love in a Cairo theater. A hushed audience watched attentively as she concluded her twenty-minute performance of "self-revolution" with a scene that mirrored the play's opening. Once again, a spotlight illuminated an empty chair, and Mirette strode over to it. This time, she removed her sweater to reveal a sleeveless shirt. She placed the sweater on the chair and walked confidently away as voice-over text from Duras's memoir narrated how that protagonist had found the strength to escape her mother's rules.²¹

Mirette's performance of her memory of coming of age required a careful collage of voices, though it had the effect of transparent self-expression. Her story of formation as a dance theater practitioner, alongside that of her sexual awakening, required both textual and physical scaffolding in order to be heard. It was not enough for Mirette to draw on her memories to tell her story, when such autobiographical women's theater had no genre history to authorize it in Egypt. Her construction of a dramatic repertoire was more artful and politicized than the simple, twenty-minute performance suggested at first glance. The dense web of texts and dance scenes that framed her everyday voice and body demonstrated that having a stage was not enough for a woman performer: she also required a representational apparatus to convey her autobiography in legible terms. Translation amplified her voice by linking it with that of Duras, and the frame of dance affirmed her gendered performance skills. Through these experimental techniques, the hypervisible woman's body claimed a self-authored representational space.

The Dance of Recognition for Women's Drama

A standing-room audience of about eighty at the Young Directors festival at CFCC responded enthusiastically to *Details*. Mikhail won a special jury award for "delicacy of expression" (*riqqat al-ta'bir*) in addition to the best actress prize, and the French cultural center invited her to restage the show

at its celebration of International Women's Day. It was invited also to the dance festival organized by the head of the Modern Dance School, Walid Aouni, in June. Mikhail's remarkable success demonstrated the merits of working across dance and theater to weave an unusual yet resonant performance. As she represented a community of contemporary dancers seeking to be included in the theatrical avant-garde, she also claimed recognition for her feminist narrative as more than an instance of mimicry. The Egyptian woman's coming-of-age story was full of personal and local details that asserted its authenticity. Where few independent theater productions (even at Young Directors) had strong female characters, it was significant that the best actress appeared in a dance theater piece.

Mikhail's performance of identity in translation foregrounded the extensive labor of representing women in independent Egyptian theater. It was not enough to improvise sketches from contemporary life, as male dramatists did, when women's public personas were extensively policed and criticized. Creating recognizable women characters required a detour through outsider performance genres in order to excavate scenarios of self-representation. Novels like Duras's offered scenarios for underrepresented aspects of gender performance (such as women's sexuality), which lent the weight of cultural authority. The young Egyptian theater maker enlisted the support of a legendary French novelist to perform her coming-of-age. The dialogue of texts played a role above and beyond that of making the work of translation visible. It also expanded the tiny Egyptian genre of women's theater. As Charles L. Briggs and Richard Bauman argue, intertextual linkages render genre a flexible concept capable of accommodating new material.²² It was thus equally possible to read *Details* as a contribution to the genre of adapted translations in Egyptian theater and as a contribution to feminist theater.

The use of dance and translation to frame feminist performance created certain problems of cultural recognition. As a marginalized figure in theater, the storytelling woman took center stage in exceptional circumstances. Mikhail's storytelling voice was authorized by the cultural stature of French literature, as well as the event of a festival sponsored by a French cultural center. It was within this frame that she was able to perform her autobiography. However, the visibility of the woman's body, and audibility of her voice, remained precarious in independent theater. Such culturally marginal scenarios as Mikhail's proved difficult to re-create, and women had to perform constantly for recognition and validation. This "burden of liveness" turned their performances of subaltern identity into an endless process of appeal to cultural authorities.²³ Thus, the awards and various forms of recognition for *Details* did little to secure the place of feminist dance theater within independent festivals. It remained an occasional genre. Doubly minoritized as a woman and a dancer, Mikhail capitalized on the novelty of her performance style but also wished she could be accepted as an unexceptional member of the independent theater community.

The persistent demand of Egyptian cultural authenticity even in the avant-garde showed that theater bore an enduring link to national identity politics, and women were disproportionately charged with representing that identity. At the same time, the demands of avant-garde theater drew performers to stage marginal stories. The subaltern status of women directors within the avant-garde necessitated alliance building to affirm their cultural authority. Bridging feminist and mainstream avant-garde theater through an established Egyptian genre proved a more sustainable way of validating feminism than translation, as Abeer Ali found in her troupe's signature mix of *sha'bi* (folksy) and feminist narrative. While the aesthetic style of Mikhail's dance theater would fit into a European avant-garde festival, Ali's Misahharati troupe had a folk-feminist repertoire with a more traditional look. Yet it carved out a solid space for women's theater within the independent movement. It was the sole independent troupe that worked professionally as a self-styled women's theater company. The politics of performing marginal identity in a folksy mode resonated more easily with the styles of critique central to independent theater, allowing the troupe to link feminism to broader calls for subaltern representation in national culture.

Mediating Feminism through Popular Culture

Ali's Misahharati belonged to a group of independent troupes (including Al-Suradiq, Al-Daw', and Al-Warsha) that flourished in the 1990s and adapted folk performance genres for urban stages. They used a range of styles, from acrobatic satire to comic monologues, in keeping with the broad conceptualization of folk culture in modern Egyptian theater. The term *sha'bi* theater, or *masrah al-sha'b* (theater of the people), per historian Ali al-Ra'i's volumes on the topic, assembled within the genre different performance traditions from rural and working-class Egyptian life.²⁴ It referenced all kinds of performance that took place outside an Italian box theater, which the Arabic word *al-masrah* (theater) had described for about a century. In the 1960s, Egyptian intellectuals began to call for including more local repertoires within modern theater. Most famously, novelist and playwright Yusuf Idris called for culturally specific theater in his manifesto *Nahwa masrah 'arabi (Toward an Arab Theater)*.²⁵ Idris's contention that Egyptian folk culture spoke more directly to Egyptian audiences than European theater did won affirmation both from literary playwrights, who wove folk forms into their dramas, and from directors like General Organization of Cultural Palaces veteran Abd al-Rahman al-Shafi'i, who modeled his musical theater on "the folk spectacle" (*al-furja al-sha'biya*).²⁶ The sixties wave of cultural nationalism that brought *sha'bi* repertoires into state-sponsored theater was consolidated with the establishment of the Mass Culture Organization, which was dedicated to producing art in the service of national identity.²⁷

In public cultural institutions of the Mubarak era, folk culture was marked off as belonging to a space of roots and traditions, from which modern artists had come a long way. This was true in the fine arts as well as theater.²⁸ Tellingly, the Institute for Folk Arts (Ma'had al-Funun al-Sha'biya) and Theater Institute (Ma'had al-Masrah) occupied different buildings on Cairo's Academy of Arts campus. Ali and her fellow folk-oriented independent dramatists challenged such institutional separations by arguing that popular culture was an organic part of modern urban life. Ali came from the town of Suez and was raised on popular performance styles. She dedicated her theater to demonstrating their contemporaneity and closeness to what counted as modern culture, particularly in urban neighborhoods. Her day job at the Folklore Atlas at the Giza Cultural Palace helped her develop field methods for researching popular culture, which she repurposed for her own troupe. It staged a return to the ideals of the cultural palaces with a twist, centering women's stories within folk culture.

The name of the Misahharati troupe, "awakener" in Arabic, referred to the drummer who woke sleepers for dawn prayers during Ramadan. Ali intended it as a metaphor of social consciousness-raising. Although she had trained in fine arts, she chose theater as her medium because "a theatrical show discusses an idea that one is afraid to approach in reality, it breaks the wall of fear." To this end, popular culture gave her language for "things not broadcast in society, which the middle class in its refinement covers up."²⁹ The troupe's "theater lab" (*mukhtabar al-masrah*) gathered oral texts on themes that Ali outlined in accordance with her projects for women's rights nongovernmental organizations or broader feminist goals. In 2004, the research project on "the history of Egyptian homes" focused on themes of love and marriage. Ali, her dramaturge Rasha Abdel Moneim, and actor-researcher Muhammad Abdel Mu'izz collated the songs and stories that troupe members brought to form a corpus for training in voice and rhythm. "Someone may bring me a song she heard from her grandmother, which was not recorded," Ali said, "but someone else might bring a 'pop' song in the *sha'bi* style from the market. I include both songs, because I want to say something through them." The troupe performers adapted these narratives into their signature *samir* (storytelling circle). The intertextual connection between the narratives was embodied by the performers seated together in a semicircle that now represented a spectrum of national popular voices.

Misahharati's repertoire of texts in colloquial Egyptian Arabic affirmed that this language register was as much a medium of modern culture as was formal literary language. "We love and hate, rejoice and are sad, sing and dance and gesture in Egyptian," the troupe's mission statement asserted. Indeed, films, pop music, and folk songs in Egyptian Arabic linked more and less well-educated Egyptians. Yet middle-class youth raised on globalized cultural production seemed less interested in live performances of popular repertoires. When the troupe held monthly performances of its new songs

and stories at Cairo's Atelier art gallery, the rows of folding chairs in the gallery's courtyard filled mostly with older literati who enjoyed the folksy warmth of the *sibriya* (soirée). As an open rehearsal of repertoire, the soirée aimed at building a shared aural memory between the performers. The gaps between songs and stories from different historical contexts were minimized by singing in the same key and using quick transitions. This musical collage style of performance became Misahharati's signature and its key technique for suturing the oral texts selected as an archive of popular voices commenting on gender relations.

The full-length dramatic work *Harem Tales* grew out of that year's research project in Egyptian homes. After several years of building its fan base, the troupe now attempted an ambitious synthesis of folk style and feminist message. It framed the circle of storytellers and singers interpreting the collected oral texts as a *haramlik*, or women's quarters in a historical Ottoman home. Setting the texts from a range of modern contexts in this atavistic milieu was an overt authenticating strategy. Moreover, the performance included working-class men as members of the subaltern harem. All of the actors wore wigs, shawls, and other bits of costume over their black shirts and pants to act as urban dramatists impersonating folksier characters. Their use of identity drag synthesized urban and rural, historical and contemporary voices as elements of popular culture. In performing their eclectic repertoire as women's culture, moreover, Misahharati asked audiences to find parallels between feminist ideas and traditional Egyptian figures of subaltern strength.

The troupe's oldest members were Minha Zeitun and Nihad Abul Einein, experienced television actors in their forties. They worked for little money in Misahharati because they liked strong roles for women their age and enjoyed the communal process of theater making. Maryam Ahmed and Fairuz Karawya were rising young singers who found singing with Misahharati a more respectable option than performing at music venues. Mu'izz and Yahya Mahmoud, the two male actors in the troupe, performed occasionally in amateur General Organization of Cultural Palaces productions. The troupe's reputation for feminism attracted more women, but it welcomed all who were interested in subaltern storytelling and oral history. Abdel Moneim curated the collection of stories and songs for the monthly soirée. Choosing the collage of texts to represent popular culture was the job of the director and dramaturge, both of whom identified as feminists and chose to tell stories reflecting their politics.

Abdel Moneim's scholarly training in theater criticism complemented Ali's background in cultural palace management to foster a highly productive and well-run troupe. As dramaturge, Abdel Moneim took charge of the handwritten stories that troupe members brought in, edited them, and simplified the language after actors had tried narrating them. She synthesized an urban, feminine language register across the stories from different popular genres. Ali coached the actors in storytelling using these texts and helped

them develop realistic versions of folksy voices. “We don’t want melodrama,” she cautioned actors when they slipped into broad emotional tones and rustic hand gestures. A modern, urban register of speech, and gestures to match, built the tonal base for the play. Then the dramaturge and director distributed tales and songs among storytellers and scripted dialogue between them.

The Misahharati troupe began rehearsals for *Harem Tales* in June 2004, in preparation for the August edition of the Independent Theater Festival. As the actors sat down to practice their stories in the shady courtyard of the Atelier gallery each evening, they developed voices that fleshed out their words with minimal bodily movement. Ali and Abdel Moneim paired tales and songs that echoed each other, building a narrative that progressed along the lines of the frame story, of an ill-fated romance between a fairy-tale man and woman. The pieces ranged widely in genre: some songs were from the 1920s, and others from a decade ago. In addition to oral texts gathered in field research, Abdel Moneim scripted others in the same tone, with a more intentionally feminist message. Incorporating all of these into the dramatic collage of *Harem Tales* built intertextual links across gaps between generations, social classes, and geographies in the origins of the texts. The fantasy of a shared, profeminist popular culture was the subject of some debate in the troupe. “Isn’t the fairy-tale language a bit exaggerated?” asked a skeptical actor. This recurring concern led Ali to condense the frame tale, built from a Palestinian fairy tale. The other texts were performed in a more conversational register signifying contemporary time.

The combination of traditional and contemporary texts that the troupe wove experimentally in its “theater lab” fashioned a mixed space of popular culture. The performers’ carefully homogenized speech register gave the various scenarios the illusion of a common ground. The *sha’bi* performance genre evoked a warm and welcoming home, which nonetheless accommodated tales of gender conflict. It was a quixotic use of the *samir*, which other Egyptian dramatists used for collective narrations of epic ballads.³⁰ The metaphor of the harem, the director explained to her troupe, was intended to invert the typically masculine *samir* and include all who wanted their voices to be heard. “All of us live in a harem,” she said, describing life in a patriarchal society where subaltern subjects suffered together.

The main thread of *Harem Tales* was a dialogue between folksy stories and feminist polemics, staged as a running battle between the Old Ladies at a Wedding (‘Awagiz al-Farah), played by men in drag, and a feisty young woman called the Masculine Girl (Al-Bint al-Mustargila). In the familiar scenario of a family wedding, generational differences were clearly defined. The Masculine Girl was a college-educated, contemporary young urban woman whose part grew larger as the fairy-tale narrative was whittled down from the original script of *Harem Tales*. The tragic love story in the frame tale, between embattled fisherman Ali and his beloved, Nur, had been written as an allegory of the difficulty of marriage in Egypt’s current economic situation. After false

starts in rehearsal, the Masculine Girl's feminist voice replaced that of Nur. Her salvo in response to an old woman telling her to marry was characteristically earthy: "Lord, give me a man. Or anything with a mustache—a rat, a cockroach—so I can be rid of people's nagging!"³¹ Giving her a folksy wit that matched the Old Ladies' placed the Girl on a shared footing with them.

The dramatic scenario of inclusive popular culture was not an even playing field, however. The Old Ladies, played by male actors Mu'izz and Yahya in wigs and shawls, embodied old-fashioned gender roles as hyperfeminine Mai and bespectacled, gray-haired Elene. They had a large repertoire of verbal art at their disposal. Performing in drag allowed the male actors to improvise lines by drawing on styles of repartee conventionally gendered masculine. The Masculine Girl held her own in the clash of generations. However, the male actors' comic ad-libs weighted the script in a traditionally folksy direction that worried dramaturge Abdel Moneim. She advocated for more scripted feminist parables, in the form of tales paired with popular songs that echoed their message. The troupe's path from collecting songs and stories to performing a full-fledged show revealed some friction between the different registers of folk storytelling incorporated strategically into the feminist narrative. The reception of different stories in the *samir* performance tested how a feminist concept of gender roles carried over in popular styles of voice.

Keying *Sha'bi* Performance for Avant-Garde Audiences

Harem Tales premiered at the Independent Theater Festival in August 2004 and invited the sophisticated Hanager audience into a world of fairy-tale wonder. The black-clad actors and spare stage set made it clear that the harem of the play's title was metaphorical. A well-known folksong, to which the audience was invited to clap along, generated a shared warmth (*al-difa*) in the troupe's signature opening gesture. Then, Nihad the Storyteller, in a Palestinian *galabiya*, launched into the frame tale about the fisherman Ali: "When he slept, he saw himself dressed all in silk, his pockets filled with money, and owner of a big palace. The endless gardens of his palace were filled with deer and canaries and ostriches, and girls so beautiful as to say to the moon, 'Move over, I'll take your place.'" Gray-wigged Elene brought the Storyteller firmly back to the present with a skeptical question: "I say, when Ali goes to heaven will he find girls as pretty as those in advertisements on satellite television?" Her friend Mai lamented the prospect of husbands ogling women in heaven too. The three older female characters together embodied an intertextual repertoire of popular culture that was both folksy and contemporary. Their conversation opened up a space of savvy *sha'bi* womanhood beyond stereotypes of melodramatic peasants on television. Their forms of feminine knowledge came readily into dialogue, as each sought to outwit the other.

The opening scene set the tone for “the harem” as a space of subaltern wisdom and wit.

The performance shifted to a more modern key when the Masculine Girl took her turn, telling of her travails in love. The Old Ladies urged her to dress and wear makeup in order to attract men, though their own fussy wigs and shawls marked the advice as slightly comic. Mai delivered a piece of proverbial wisdom—“a man can set up a house for you”—that the Girl countered with facts about how contemporary Cairo women earned their own money. Her scathing, earthy monologue on husbands who expected wives to come home from work and indulge them as if they were children elicited roars of laughter from the Hanager audience. The Girl’s feisty performance resonated with many women’s conversations about marriage, Ali noted, telling me that women regularly came up to her after the show to say so. Airing such stories in a bluntly folksy voice was among the most successful performance tactics in the play. The Girl’s telling of home truths showed that ordinary Egyptian women had a rich vocabulary for problems that professional feminists were seeking to make visible.

Women’s domestic tactics were not always opposed to patriarchal values, however. When Mai took over the story and told of the manipulative marital repertoires of her own generation, she also won applause from the audience.

MAI: I used to slave for my mother-in-law, oh my, and as soon as he came home I’d put on lipstick and kohl and wear my outfit—
(*to Elene*) do you remember it?

ELENE (*nodding*): A belly dance outfit! No bride was without one in those days . . .

MAI: So as soon as he entered . . . “See, sir!”—innocently of course—
(*whispers in his ear*).

HUSBAND (*Yahya sheds Elene’s clothes and puts on a mustache*): Oh goodness! I owe you, my pretty one (*reaches out to embrace her*).

MAI (*withdraws, covering her arm*): Ouch! My arm hurts from helping your mother—I mean mama, dear thing. I’m sure she means no harm, but . . .

The scene of traditional husband management was paired with a 1920s Egyptian song. Young singer Maryam interpreted “It’s Me or Your Mother,” a gramophone classic by Ratiba Ahmed, in the signature nasal tone of that era and wore the netted Ottoman face veil called the *yashmak*. Her transgenerational embodiment of the *‘alima* (dancer/singer) repertoire showed that Egyptian feminists had other verbal resources available to them than logical argument. The intertextual linkage between wifely tactic and classic song situated a profeminist repertoire within a national popular culture.

In its most utopian form, the capacious harem accommodated different generations of women’s performance tactics. The cultural gaps between their

voices were minimal, since all spoke or sang in the same language register. Differences between warring couples, too, were readily resolved by comic repartee. Yet the scenario of battle between generations often was skewed in favor of the Old Ladies. These fast-tongued characters unwittingly showed that folksy repartee was a weapon in patriarchal repertoires, as their put-downs of the Girl brought laughter at the expense of women into the theater. Moving between different keys of folksy women's speech was a riskily inclusive gesture on the part of the feminist dramatists. In performance, their mixed repertoire showed itself to be marked by gender hierarchies, which put young feminists at a relative disadvantage as outsiders to popular comedy and traditional repertoires of storytelling.

Harem Tales beckoned to a broad Egyptian audience through an inclusive discourse about strong women across contexts. It presented "stories of Egyptian homes" as a hidden popular culture in which women were proficient. Gendering popular culture in this way was a strategy the troupe borrowed from academic feminists, who used folktales and fairy tales to fashion woman-centered stories. However, the utopian postcolonial gesture of unearthing critical culture from subaltern genres encountered limitations in performance. Men in drag embodied archetypal folksy humor with more success than female actors and made some misogynistic jokes. The harem itself sometimes appeared as men's public culture in drag; the modified *samir* was after all a traditionally masculine form. The feminist storytelling in *Harem Tales* was thus a partial success: audiences sometimes failed to applaud when they should, and the Old Ladies got so many laughs that they improvised extra lines. Their folksy language carried the aura of its patriarchal origins. The broad subaltern world that the play cast as a harem contained fault lines that came up in tensions between feminist and conservative characters. Its affirmative staging of folk culture revealed the limits of traditional storytelling as a means of feminist critique. However, scripted monologues about the wounds of patriarchy used the storytelling genre critically to voice domestic secrets.

Confessional Storytelling as a Weapon of the Weak

The harem of the play was home to plain talk among intimates, as well as public verbal art. Once audiences had grown familiar with the characters, they voiced a darker repertoire of "stories from Egyptian homes." Their confessional performances brought folksy humor to a domestic register of social critique that was not often acknowledged in popular culture. Mu'izz put on sunglasses to play a man confiding to friends about his unsatisfying marital life and troubles with impotence. He claimed to lack sexual desire because of "the stress of political circumstances" in Egypt, but his neighbors saw through his shifty performance. Their skeptical expressions forced out the truth: he

had been unhappy in his marriage and had an affair with a colleague's wife. The audience laughed, and the story became part of a joking repertoire. It drew a livelier response than the frame tale about the star-crossed lover Ali that it echoed. The story of an evil caliph who thwarted young love had been intended as an allegory of contemporary Egypt. In the storytelling circle, it resonated with a more comic everyday story. The impotent man was forced to confront his ethical shortcomings in the harem, where all secrets came out. The *samir* was a metaphor for popular culture itself.

Mu'izz and Yahya demonstrated this critical form of humor in their next tale, narrated as gossip between two men at a café. They took turns sharing the story of a married woman, Safiya, who manipulated her husband. Safiya had gone missing from bed one night and returned three days later with a story to excuse her absence. Mu'izz and Yahya acted out the scene with heavy irony, making it clear that Safiya's dream lover was a wealthy Saudi who paid for sex.

SAFIYA: Someone came to me dressed all in white . . .

SAYYID: Where did he come to you?

SAFIYA: In a dream [*fī-l-manam*], where else? He was dressed all in white, and rode a horse that was all white. And said to me, wake up, Safiya, wake up and take your due from Abdallah! So I went with him Sayyid, and when I mounted the horse I felt as if I were a feather floating in the breeze. Then he brought me back and gave me these fifty dollars. (*Loud laughs and applause from audience.*) But he said something, Sayyid, which I could not understand! He said, this money is for you, and the other half is for your household expenses.

SAYYID (*line spoken by both actors*): It's a blessing, Safiya! It shows that evil does not visit in vain.

Making up a fairy tale saved face for a wife who supplemented the family income through such escapades, and the husband accepted them with a sanctimonious proverb. The storytellers appreciated such verbal art as a survival skill in which women specialized. When the harem was framed as a dysfunctional space of secrets, popular wit and humor lent painfully ironic situations some dignity. This version of popular culture, less noble than recognized folk genres, showed "the people" to be ordinary, marginal members of Egyptian society. Their intimate exchanges within the storytelling circle revealed a repertoire of language about sexuality that offered an alternative to more recognized popular culture. If the Old Ladies' advice on marriage showed the public face of popular culture, confessional stories represented its secret truths.

The darker section of *Harem Tales* incorporated familiar songs and unusual stories gathered during oral history research, just like the sunnier side of

popular culture. Notably, this secret repertoire made the final statement in the play, as characters offered their reflections on how to change the dysfunctional harem from within. The character of middle-aged Sitt al-Kull (Ms. Competent) was one such everyday philosopher. As a contemporary storyteller, actor Minha wore eyeglasses on a chain and spoke in the tone of a woman who had seen it all. Earlier in the play, she had contributed a fairy tale about a man who married a female *jinn* and grew afraid of her magical powers. Ending with a wry allusion to men's fear of competent women, she told a similar tale toward the play's end, about how she dealt with a domineering new male manager in her office. Lighting a cigarette, she described handling his youthful ego with patient humor and eventually winning his respect. Ms. Competent made a place for her storytelling wisdom through a strategic hybrid of verbal techniques. Like the Old Ladies, she knew how to manage men; unlike them, she relied on her own experience rather than folksy tricks. The actor's use of scripted stories and everyday embodiment to perform an urban style of popular wisdom carried the "stories from Egyptian homes" into contemporary office scenes by ridding the female body of traditional mannerisms.

By the play's end, many characters had shed their colorful bits of costume and performed as urban Egyptians. Likewise, the narrative shifted from mythical to contemporary time. The chief Storyteller wrapped up the fairy-tale of Ali and Nur with a hasty happy ending, which her companions in the circle rejected. Each offered his or her own interpretation of the tale. "I am Nur!" the Masculine Girl asserted, recounting her own disappointment with men. Ms. Competent saw the couple's disillusionment as a realistic result of what happened when lovers began to see each other clearly: Nur was not as beautiful as in the dream, and Ali struggled with poverty. The epic narrative of disappointment resonated in contemporary Egypt, where dystopian failures were a widely recognized fact of life. As Yahya pointed out, "We are all living in the Caliph's harem, or under the magician Qarun's spell." Each scenario in the performance showed how subaltern cultural repertoires allowed the weak to push back occasionally against epic oppression. Rich repertoires of plain talk, humor, and domestic irony grew out of the shared popular experience of injustice. When performed onstage, these stories lacked the visual dazzle of folksy genres. But they did stage subaltern voices that offered alternatives to both canonized folklore and representations of the folk in literary drama. *Harem Tales* eventually showed the modernity of folk culture as a subaltern repertoire.

Critical and Popular Responses to Folk Feminism

Harem Tales was widely applauded by audiences and critics at the Independent Theater Festival for its virtuosic singing and storytelling. A glowing

review in the weekly magazine *Sabah al-Khayr*, by veteran critic Luis Gris, called the troupe “a treasure of folk arts” and recommended that the play be invited to “enliven Ramadan nights at the Ramadan tent set up by the Ministry of Culture on the grounds of the Opera House.”³² Gris made no mention, however, of the play’s gender critique. Feminist English-language critic Nehad Selaiha wrote a more ambivalent review that addressed the representational politics of its folksy staging of womanhood. “Intended as a corrective satire on the negative aspects of female consciousness and behavior, *Tales of the Harem* seemed nevertheless, in both form and content, to be looking backwards with nostalgia to earlier, happier and more peaceful times,” she wrote.³³ The folksy aesthetic that appealed to Gris (who was among the regulars at Atelier) appeared to Selaiha as affirmative of folk traditions rather than truly critical. In her reading, feminist critique in a folksy voice inevitably echoed nostalgic celebrations of popular culture. Several younger members of the avant-garde theater world were similarly reluctant to hear the play’s folksy voices as critical. Two women friends with whom I attended the play were rattled by its misogynistic jokes, which overshadowed the feminist statements in their view. Their spectatorial experience of the adapted *samir* was different from my intellectual one, raising the question of the degree to which avant-garde versions of popular performance inevitably reproduced the hegemonic cultural politics of their source genres.

The intertextual techniques used in *Harem Tales* were more traditionalizing than those of *Details*, with small gaps in language and style between texts woven into a neofolk repertoire. As Briggs and Bauman point out, intertextuality is bound by ideology, so that feminist adapters of folk genres were ideologically constrained in the degree to which they could hybridize these repertoires. The *sha’bi* genres deployed in *Harem Tales* infused the performance with the flavor of their gender roles for my urban intellectual friends, as for Selaiha. Moreover, the play went on to the national women’s theater festival in 2006, where the actors playing the Old Ladies won prizes, signaling that it was received there as the kind of nostalgic celebration Selaiha had feared.

Harem Tales also played at Cairo University, the Rotary Club, and other venues around town for a remarkable run of over two years. Ali mentioned that the questionnaires she distributed after these shows came back with some satisfying responses from audience members. “They were surprised that they enjoyed it, even though all the actors were sitting down,” she shared when we met up in 2007. “Many people said, you say everything that’s inside us! Everything that happens in our homes! Many people said, this is my mother-in-law, this is me, this is our neighbor. You say everything very honestly.”³⁴ Such moments of recognition were particularly gratifying to a director who worked hard to address more popular audiences than usual for avant-garde theater. “The cultured people saw the work as drama, and ordinary people saw it as their story,” she explained. *Harem Tales* apparently worked better

as a feminist performance with the latter audiences. They heard the critical register in the storytellers' voices, whereas Cairo intellectuals had been troubled by the folksy overtones. Popular avant-gardism was a utopian idea that proved difficult to define in practice.

Misahharati's experimental use of song and storytelling for feminist critique secured the troupe's position as a leading innovator of folksy performance in the independent theater movement. Its partial success in voicing social critique through popular characters furthered the movement's mission to move beyond intellectual audiences as well. Yet the genre that *Harem Tales* developed appeared to evade definition as feminist theater, as the cultural establishment assigned it to the *sha'bi* camp. Its mixed reception highlighted an enduring dilemma of directors looking to win recognition for subaltern characters in modern theater: How could they define these characters as popular without falling into traditionalist modes of representation? The arc of *Harem Tales*, from fairy-tale storyteller to modern Ms. Competent, gestured at reconciling iconographies of Egyptian womanhood divided into the traditional and modern, to create a repertoire of popular storytelling. Since the troupe emphasized vocal over visual performance, actors were able to reconcile cultural registers with relative ease. Yet their verbal repertoires sometimes bore the stamp of traditional gender performance. It was when they spoke everyday urban stories, based on field research in Cairo, that they most successfully embodied the modernity of folk struggles. Subaltern voices now appeared as those of neighbors rather than distant foremothers. Their modest inclusion at the Independent Theater Festival was a gesture of recognition for folk struggles within avant-garde cultural politics.

Feminists between Cosmopolitanism and Indigeneity

A handful of troupes led by women were among the most successful of the free theater movement, even as they faced the conundrum of staging Egyptian women's experience with few scripts or dramatic genres to use as resources. These two plays show some of the ways in which feminist performers developed Egyptian voices for the stage by borrowing from foreign and local repertoires. Directors Mirette Mikhail and Abeer Ali used intertextual strategies both to produce original genre frames for women's stories and to authorize these genres with reference to established dramatic traditions. Each of their performance hybrids carried traces of the respective genres within which they framed the emergence of women's voices from the margins. Women who played storytellers onstage were not simply mediating cultural or personal memory but rather adapting repertoires that others had authored. They used the traditional dichotomy between archives and repertoires in literary drama to authorize their performances through either literary or folk standards. The storyteller's voice turned the text into living,

local culture and invited recognition for it within a contemporary performance repertoire. The story was a relational medium, in Samuel Weber's terms, gaining its theatrical power by staging connections between here and elsewhere.³⁵

When feminist performers mediated between sites of cosmopolitanism, gender conservatism, and avant-garde thought, they raised many questions about how independent theater related to other cultural spaces. How close was it to European forms of sexual liberalism, or to gender norms in popular urban quarters in Egypt? Women onstage carried the burden of mediating these questions of cultural proximity, and they were challenged more often than men for their affiliations. At the same time, they had the opportunity to build their own space in the landscape of avant-garde performance. With no inherited norms to challenge inside the theater world, pioneering feminist dramatists freely adapted outside texts and brought new stories into independent theater. Their gestures of opening up the terrain of theatrical representation stimulated ways of imagining avant-gardists as an expansive and mobile community. Even if it remained somewhat marginal, women's theater engendered a mix of repertoires that democratized the representational practice of independent theater. The folksy voices of *Harem Tales* and outspoken autobiography of *Details* were performances of subaltern voices that assumed their place in the movement's repertoire. These performances opened the genres into which they entered, taking outsider positions that questioned the boundaries of folk storytelling and translated theater.

Together with their spatial centering of women's voices, these performances foreshadowed the recognition of other experiences minoritized in independent theater. Their gestures of celebrating subaltern identities staged disidentification with their roles as recognized intellectuals, imagining an avant-garde in which less privileged minorities were at the center of the cultural landscape.³⁶ Folk-style theater and feminist storytelling both grew more popular in independent theater in the following years. After the Hanager theater closed for repairs in 2007, these genres found a warmer welcome in subcultural venues. Folk-style troupes Hala and Red Tomato (formerly Al-Khayal al-Sha'bi) turned to street theater (see chapter 6), while the Bussy troupe, formed at the American University in Cairo, continues to stage feminist storytelling at nongovernmental organizations and universities. Indeed, the hybrid genres developed by marginal players in independent theater proved better equipped to survive a post-Hanager era, in which dramatists had to collaborate with small institutions that served subaltern groups.

Their flexible performance repertoires enabled some independent troupes to cross over to different institutional contexts, and to work outside theater spaces as well. Nongovernmental organizations using theater for social change became key patrons of folk-style independent troupes, for instance. Storytellers' framings of small-scale social questions were often better suited to such work than were the national narratives of political theater troupes.

Subaltern citizenship was performed in various such minor repertoires as independent theater extended its networks in the years after 2004. Private cultural institutions of the late Mubarak era recognized the skills of theater makers who imagined citizenship from below as the state cultural infrastructure crumbled around them. In some cases, they invited dramatists to teach in their neoliberal projects of cultural education. The avant-garde gesture of claiming recognition for marginal citizens then transformed into the very different practice of using theater techniques to train such citizens in the culture of the globalized workplace.

Feminist performers who devised original means to represent themselves onstage were among the avant-gardists who capitalized on cultural democracy to win recognition for subaltern identities. Staging the self as the means of its own representation was certainly a feminist gesture for the dramatists examined in this chapter. It also aligned unexpectedly with neoliberal cultural politics of self-making. The boundaries between individualized performance on the left and the center of the cultural landscape grew permeable as independents began moving decisively away from socialist-era theater institutions. In educational workshops for self-cultivation, avant-garde practices of rehabilitating marginalized identities came to serve cultural programs with a more entrepreneurial bent. Utopian visions of democracy through culture did not die out, then, when venues for avant-garde theater vanished. They were recycled and recoded to serve neoliberal repertoires of citizenship.

Chapter 5



Instrumentalizing Performance in Self-Help Citizenship

In the summer of 2007, the catastrophe at Beni Suef left a lingering cloud over Egypt's theaters. State-owned theaters throughout the country remained closed for fireproofing repairs, from the stately halls of cultural palaces to the Hanager Arts Center. What was usually the busiest performance season of the year now saw a lull, particularly for the independent theater movement, which was hit by the loss of its key festival venue. Its leading dramatists returned resignedly to their day jobs. When I called old friends in Cairo to reconnect after two years away, several asked to meet at workshops they were teaching in venues unfamiliar to me. Twenty-eight-year-old actor Sameh had turned his interest in drama therapy into a training program at Mohandiseen's Actors' Studio (Studyu al-Mumaththil). The private studio in a middle-class building was a far cry from Sameh's usual downtown café haunts. Riding the elevator to the address provided, I found a spacious apartment with a waiting room where young professionals smoked quietly, chatted, or checked their phones. One journalist waiting for the workshop told me she came here after work and found it to be "like a yoga class." Indeed, Sameh began class with relaxing exercises in a darkened room, followed by narrative prompts that delved gradually into participants' memories to generate dramatic narratives. In this setting of self-care, theater became a way of staging and examining personal biographies.

On radio shows playing in Cairo taxis that summer, my ear repeatedly caught the neologisms *al-tanmiya al-bashariyya* (human development) and *al-tanmiya al-dhatiyya* (personal development), referring to a new cultural movement that conceived of the individual and his or her body as objects of development. American self-help books translated into Arabic, which dotted the stands of street-side booksellers, influenced the vocabulary of personal development coaches. Following the success of Egypt's most famous televangelist, Amr Khaled, new self-help gurus like Ibrahim al-Fiki, host of the television show *Success without Borders (Al-najah bila hudud)*, taught youth to educate themselves rather than relying on schools. It was a message that resonated in a theater world deprived of its key institutions. At workshops in Cairo over the next two years (2007–9), I met young participants from

middle-class backgrounds who believed acting techniques would build the self-presentation skills they needed to get jobs. This was especially true if they sought service jobs, at a time when employment in other professions dwindled. Echoing the ascetics who turned to self-care when social morality weakened, these self-help aficionados took the body as material over which to exercise mastery.¹ Their youthful ethics of personal enterprise mirrored the neoliberal ideology of officials in the Mubarak regime, in the embodied form of educational practice.

Across the river from Mohandiseen, in the posh Zamalek neighborhood, a businessman had turned an even more unlikely space into a center where self-help workshops were offered. Sakiat al-Sawi (Al-Sawi's Culture Wheel) had been a trash space before advertising entrepreneur Muhammad al-Sawi used his connections to gain a permit to build two large halls and a Nile-side garden. The Sakia, as it was popularly known, soon assumed the Hanager's place as the liveliest venue in town for young artists, dramatists, and culture aficionados to gather. The main hall hosted amateur theater and a range of musical performances, while lectures and skill-building workshops at the smaller River Hall also drew loyal audiences. The youth cultures of independent theater and personal development coexisted, intertwined, and occasionally clashed at this private cultural center. As fires at the cultural palaces and then Cairo's National Theater made visible the shocking erosion of the public cultural infrastructure, such private centers grew in number and reputation. They stood apart from the Ministry of Culture's artistic program by teaching person-centered techniques more than national cultural ideology. Acting programs for self-help were part of this privatized new network of pedagogy, in which professionals shared their embodied knowledge with students and unemployed graduates seeking to build new cultural repertoires. Hegemonic concepts of youth culture and institutional infrastructure were both transformed in the process.

The three cultural programs I describe in this chapter deployed theater techniques to teach personal skills, adapting self-help scripts for an Egyptian context of accelerated economic reform and high unemployment. Acting workshops at the private Sakia center, the independent theater Studio Emadeddin, and the arts program funded by the Aga Khan Foundation exemplified the instrumentalization of culture as supplementary education to keep up with the demands of the changing Egyptian economy. To perform in this job market often entailed adapting existing skills and improvising new ones. Multinational corporations had specific cultural standards for their employees, and upper-class graduates with a bilingual education had an advantage in performing accordingly. Others hoped to make up the deficit by attending a series of short workshops to build their embodied repertoires of cultural knowledge and skills. While performance took class-specific forms at each of the three workshops, I approach them as part of a shared middle-class youth culture emerging in counterpoint to the widening gap between the elites of new globalization and the majority of Egyptians whom it left behind.

The personal development cultural programs were founded on a shared belief in individual enterprise as a means to social change. Their culture concepts shared the hopeful modernism of state institutions, but diverged in eschewing institutional frameworks for cultural development. Instead their self-help rhetorics aligned with neoliberal culture, modeled on the principles of a market economy, and aimed at “constructing a social fabric in which precisely the basic units would have the form of the enterprise.”² Some Egyptian personal development programs borrowed concepts of enterprise from the Islamic trend of ethical self-improvement, pioneered by “new preachers” (*al-du’ā al-judud*) such as Amr Khaled and Mostafa Hosni.³ Others used a corporate vocabulary of skill building to describe flexible roles for globalized workplaces.⁴ Teachers who came to personal development from the independent theater movement thus adapted their concepts in an ideologically diverse landscape of neoliberal performance. Long-standing divides between religious and secular culture, and between public and private institutions, were attenuated in new programs that focused on personal ethics. A utopian language of culture represented the new Egyptian citizen without aesthetic markers of class or ideology, in magazine and website texts as well as practices. Acting teachers adapted their skills of embodiment and role-play to suit the new framing of performance as the ability to carry out a job. They taught workshop participants techniques of physical discipline and flexibility, while encouraging them to have faith that their efforts would be rewarded.

It was a time when many such grassroots projects emerged alongside mass campaigns for ethical culture in Egypt. Religious self-help programs at mosques were particularly popular among women who sought to build their ethical capacities through rigorous debate and embodied ritual.⁵ Cairo was also one of the venues of the pan-Arab Culture of Optimism program for disillusioned youth, launched by the Saudi Arab Thought Foundation.⁶ The volunteer program Resala, established in 1999, was a prominent Islamic example of social work initiatives that gained prominence as state structures failed.⁷ Art-based self-help programs, like the acting workshops I present here, formed a tiny part of this thriving ethical culture landscape. They were unique, however, because they tested the concept of personal development in embodied, material terms. Participants who underwent skills training at acting workshops often failed to find work afterward. A discourse of rehearsal borrowed from the world of theater nevertheless sustained the idea that they would find the right roles when they were ready. Their patient and hopeful striving united them with many other Egyptians working to rebuild middle-class dreams for the future in dystopian times. As workshop participants exercised control over their lives and futures through perpetual training, they found their bodies to be particular media of cultural knowledge. They were shaped by class and gender training, even if flexible enough to acquire superficial bodily skills for a new habitus. The limited possibilities of actors’ training designed to engrain such skills tested the faith of neoliberal citizens in the late Mubarak era.

Social Flexibility at an Improvisation Workshop

The grand buildings of Emadeddin Street recalled its history as the Broadway of Cairo's prewar era, and a cultural manager decided it was the right venue for his studio for teaching theater techniques. Studio Emadeddin, launched in 2005, was the culmination of Ahmed el-Attar's longtime ambition of improving production values in independent theater. While he directed the Ma'bad troupe, El-Attar had organized workshops in lighting and scene design. He used the new studio to disseminate the benefits of his arts management training further, while retaining the format of skill building in short-term workshops. El-Attar's use of his grant-writing skills to build opportunities for younger dramatists made him a respected figure in independent theater circles, despite the fact that he now made plays only for European festivals. In his late thirties, he was no longer a politicized member of the movement but rather an elder statesman. He left the management of the studio to his partner Nevine el-Ibiary. It was a spacious, wood-floored apartment with four large, soundproofed rooms that were rented out for rehearsals or used for free acting workshops arranged by the studio itself. Two computers in the small lounge area were available for browsing or research, and a simple office at the end of the hall accommodated desks for El-Ibiary and El-Attar. Two years after its launch, it was packed with young people looking to learn new skills during university summer vacation or in evening classes after their office jobs. Many were not theater makers at all.

"Lots of people who come here are addicts of workshops—they'll apply to anything," El-Ibiary remarked drily, pointing to piles of applications on her desk when I visited in the summer of 2007. "But we offer specialized workshops, with a simple selection process to ensure participants can meet the basic criteria." The studio distinguished itself from the new crop of self-help workshops by emphasizing its reputation for teaching technical skills. Professional dramatists living in Cairo contributed workshops in acting techniques like playback theater and improvisation, and El-Ibiary was currently scouting out European and Arab specialists in the region to teach more. This summer, the studio was offering a two-week workshop in improvisation taught by Ramsi Lehner, who had worked with Ma'bad since the 2004 show *Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire*. The lanky American University in Cairo graduate, about thirty years old, took improvisation courses as a student in Boston. He now worked as an acting teacher in a private high school in Cairo, where improvisation was among the techniques he taught as a means of building confidence and social skills in students. Lehner saw improvisation technique in particular as "a stepping stone toward conflict resolution, onstage and off."⁸ His workshop at Studio Emadeddin was oriented toward both specialized actors and those attending for personal development, since he believed the technique could enrich social and performance repertoires alike.

Twenty-six participants came to the improvisation workshop, including students from several universities and young professionals who had worked as amateur actors. Lehner gathered them in a circle to explain that improv was not like the acting techniques they may have studied before. "I'm not interested in your acting abilities," was the provocative statement with which he began the first class. "What I'm interested in is getting your thoughts organized." Lehner set out the program of warm-up, focus, and coordination exercises through which he aimed to break boundaries and facilitate ensemble work. Getting organized meant working with others and reconfiguring one's own embodiment. He explained to me later that he was also countering what he saw as problematic aspects of theater training in Cairo: the inculcated rigidity of social performance that limited actors' potential, and the tendency of individual actors to show off, rather than work as a group. Improvisation techniques cultivated more fluid bodily boundaries as well as a sense of collective action. The workshop participants played along enthusiastically, enjoying the exercises, which allowed them to experiment without a script.

One technique that Lehner used to push against bodily boundaries was a "status game," where actors worked to play with class- and gender-based embodiments. He demonstrated by getting down on all fours to mime scrubbing the floor, froze in his posture, and made way for a second actor, who reinterpreted the movement as a swimming lesson. The third actor in the chain developed the gesture into the walk of an animal. These imaginative interpretations of the moving body opened up ways of thinking about embodiment beyond high and low social status. Staging social relations as improvisation, the actors explored multiple possibilities in their connections with others. At first, some of them voiced skepticism about how a character could emerge without knowing "where its story was heading." But eventually they came to enjoy using improvised bodily configurations to allow unexpected narratives to emerge. When Lehner asked them to turn their free-association exercises into scenes, they came up with the characters of a seller of grilled corn, a spy, a Mamluk king, and a television presenter. Their playful movements generated more imaginative embodiments of character than usual for status-conscious young Cairenes. Most crucially from the instructor's perspective, they grew adept at coordinating their movements and making transitions within a scene. "We have begun to think as one mind," Lehner congratulated the actors after a particularly smooth exercise.

The participants' adept improvisation of roles and postures encouraged Lehner to plan a showcase performance at the end of the two-week workshop. He asked the actors to demonstrate exercises they had learned for an audience of family and friends, with impressively polished results. The first group staged a "sitting-standing-lying down" exercise in which each of three actors had to assume one of the postures. They used the exercise to improvise a story of an unsympathetic son who told his blind father to go to work as

a beggar. The exercises in unusual bodily postures generated several socially marginal characters, such as members of a criminal gang and disabled people, giving the middle-class actors a wide range of roles to embody. Focusing on the space between actors as a physical rather than a social space allowed them to calibrate interpersonal relations in more playful ways than usual. As Lehner instructed the actors before they went on to perform, they could go into a scene with an empty mind and take their cues from the situation. Their free associations drew on narratives from Egyptian media across a popular spectrum, as well as urban repertoires of youth culture.

One jarring moment in the otherwise triumphant evening happened in the skit of cops and robbers, a movie trope that somehow developed into an interrogation scene. A male actor interpreted his role as that of an Egyptian being interrogated by a police detective. "I'm here because I said no. Even animals can say no! Why have they sold us out and destroyed us?" he asked angrily. The others hastened to defuse the tension by framing the outburst as a scene of television melodrama: they called "Cut!" to bring it to a close. Later, Lehner said the other actors thought the political statement did not fit the logic of their scene. Since they were learning to embody social roles, they tended to act in conformity. After all, the aim was to produce a smooth flow of communication, not dramatic tension. It was a revealing moment that showed how self-modulation in improvisation produced social conformity. As the actors improvised, they governed themselves within the social norms embodied and enforced by their peer groups.

Lehner's workshop was a "democratic" space, several participants said, in which they felt free to fashion scenes cooperatively without instruction from above. It also leveled differences between lead and secondary roles. "The workshop taught me that it isn't necessary for me to be a star," mused amateur actor Bara. "I can step down sometimes to let my colleague shine, and both of us can improve the scene." This flexibility of status came at the cost of addressing real frictions and social inequality, but the participants I spoke to did not see this as a problem. Swalim, who worked as a secretary, said she could imagine using improvisation techniques to smooth her dealings with corporate clients. And economics student Walid told me the workshop taught him a lot about self-presentation. The actors developed a keener awareness of their bodily habits, and how those facilitated communication. They believed a new repertoire of improvisation skills would help them move more easily through the workplace. Whether it would help their upward mobility in the new economy was a speculative question that most were unable to answer.

When I put this question to actor Islam, he said that he saw the benefit of the workshop as teaching adaptability rather than boosting cultural capital. He was a full-time student at the prestigious Theater Institute of the Academy of Arts but said he found more room for his own ideas at the studio workshop. "The improviser has more flexibility [*luyuna*] than any other actor," Islam argued. He also appreciated the wider range of skills taught at Emadeddin.

“The studio works with foreign expertise, which has more flexibility than the Academy.” Islam’s personification of acting workshops as flexible, mirroring the improvisational actor’s agility, produced an appealing metaphor of neoliberal skill building. The adaptability of the trained improviser did indeed appeal to office workers who wanted to improve their interactional skills. Each participant I spoke to echoed the discourse of corporate “soft skills” programs where “social acts are recast in a transactional or entrepreneurial frame and actors’ segmented selves are recast as assemblages of productive elements.”⁹ Islam could recast his old-fashioned academy training as an updated assemblage of globalized skills and canonical knowledge. Whether workshop participants had come to learn acting techniques or social skills, however, the cultural trend of personal development framed their learning as self-help. It was an entrepreneurial style of education that promised to prepare them for new workplaces as elite schools did for a fortunate few. Across the spheres of theater production and personal development, “foreign expertise” was a valuable form of capital.

Studio Emadeddin was a key example of how independent dramatists adapted to the shrinking space of cultural production in the last years of the Mubarak regime, when the closure of state theaters left fewer potential patrons for their work. Now their appeals for funding were directed at corporate institutions or internationally connected nongovernmental organizations. The studio had grants from the Dutch embassy and American Ford Foundation,¹⁰ and its programming adhered conscientiously to its stated mission of capacity building and transnational exchange. It interpreted these terms to build actors’ capacities through performance skills valued at European theater festivals, as well as new Egyptian corporate workplaces. The ad hoc program of workshops, based on foreign talent available locally, ended up generating an actors’ repertoire that expanded definitions of performance technique well beyond stylized embodiment and character building. Participants in the studio’s workshops were open to learning many skills taught under the umbrella of acting. Many were taking lessons at other venues as well, and these “workshop addicts” incorporated acting techniques into their broader self-help repertoires. In the process, they showed that acting skills like improvisation could help corporate workers, and would-be television presenters, as well as dramatic actors.

While it lacked the defined program of a theater troupe, Studio Emadeddin also supported existing youth theater practice with rehearsal space that could be rented at low rates. It enabled self-management for troupes and modeled for young actors an entrepreneurial style of skill building. As they absorbed a range of techniques, their “theater culture” (*al-thaqafa al-masrahiya*) was enhanced with flexible skills of value in both the cultural and the corporate economy. A particular attraction of Studio Emadeddin workshops was that their instructors had studied abroad or at foreign universities in Cairo. Thus, the abstract language of capacity building used on the studio’s website

had the implicit referent of westernized, upper-class cultural knowledge. Yet the participants with whom I spoke had few illusions that such workshops qualified them for elite corporate jobs. They were simply acquiring modes of polished embodiment that were slightly different from those they were used to. Several participants in the improv workshop thus spoke of learning skills (*maharat*) rather than acquiring cultural knowledge (*al-thaqafa*). Nevertheless, the idea that these skills would add up to cultural capital informed their youthful enthusiasm for workshops. Their combination of faith in education and cynicism about upward social mobility was in keeping with the ethic of a generation that, though trained in neoliberal modes of self-help, saw little evidence that these changed educational or social hierarchies in Cairo. At a time when public institutions offered little hope, however, workshops were a means of keeping aspirations for a better future alive.

Improvising the role of entrepreneurs was also the compromise that independent dramatists made when they began teaching in personal development programs. They applied their skills wherever these were welcome, often with little sense of launching a career in self-help training. Lehner worked as a DJ in a nightclub, an occasional film actor, and an acting teacher in schools, as well as teaching at Studio Emadeddin. He parlayed his English-language education and upper-class background into performance skills with currency across cultural venues. Sameh's workshops creatively deployed acting skills honed through years of working in independent theater, as well as his later study of drama therapy with psychiatrist Muhammad al-Rakhawy. His gift for teaching brought him frequent, though unstable, jobs at private cultural centers around Cairo. Both men improvised to build careers as opportunities for theater work dwindled, and as they moved into their thirties, when they were expected to have a stable income. Adult masculinity was now defined in functional terms as the ability to perform as a responsible earner and provider. And for actors who no longer counted as "youth of the theater," this meant recasting their performance skills as professional skills. They emphasized that theater taught means of personal growth, echoing an older Egyptian notion of theater as a school of modern identity.

As hegemonic concepts of performance and entrepreneurship shifted during the personal development trend, institutions like Studio Emadeddin modeled the application of neoliberal economic principles to the world of cultural production. They transferred skills from upper-class instructors to middle-class workshop participants through performance repertoires that emphasized flexibility and improvisation. Middle-class youth thus built on their existing cultural capital in an open-ended process of self-improvement. Acting workshops marked a subtle but striking shift within the theater world, from thinking of culture as a collective enterprise to framing it as a personalized mode of ethical training. Continuing education to improve one's prospects after college was an increasingly widespread phenomenon, and the language of personal development framed it as a social project of collective uplift, even

as the individual bore responsibility for his or her own progress. Cultural institutions of the new era mediated this contradiction through a language of social ethics.

Bridging the Religious and the Secular in Self-Help Culture

Under an overpass in Cairo's Zamalek district, a new cultural center launched in 2004 made space for a hybrid concept of ethical culture. Sakiat Abdel Moneim al-Sawi was named after an Egyptian minister of culture in the 1970s. His son Muhammad al-Sawi, who owned an advertising agency, founded the center as a symbolic gesture of completing his late father's unfinished trilogy of novels. The Sakia was a rare example of corporate sponsorship of the arts, which built on the ideals of state cultural institutions. Businessman Al-Sawi used his personal connections to gain funding from Juhayna and Mobinil, two of Egypt's largest corporations. And he deployed his own advertising skills to publicize the Sakia through banners, billboards, and a glossy magazine. Al-Sawi's turn from business to the arts emerged from a cultural trend my theater friends termed *islahi* (reformist), referring to the modernist Islam newly fashionable in Egypt's upper classes.¹¹ As new preachers attempted to bridge cultural divides in urban Egypt by showing that elite lifestyles were compatible with religious devotion, reformists like Al-Sawi worked to show that the westernized upper classes remained committed to the nation's progress. Al-Sawi was educated at a German school, wore a short beard, and lived in Zamalek. His ethical ideas about culture marked him as a reformist despite a lifestyle that was not visibly religious. The family-friendly Sakia cultural center had a prominent No Smoking sign, a bold gesture in a city where cigarettes were widely associated with artists and intellectuals. And it featured a mix of performance arts and educational programming.

In the summer of 2008, the Nile-side campus was lively with visitors from across the middle-class spectrum. Young families exiting an early-evening puppet show found the café tables in the garden taken up by young people studying for a class, as well as others drinking tea and practicing songs on guitars. Another hint that this was not a conventional arts venue came when I found neatly printed programs for the entire month at the ticket window. The well-organized cultural center sent ripples of commentary through Cairo's theater world. "The Sakia is simply a business enterprise with no ideology," scoffed my director friend Ahmed. "It might feature a rock band which says there is no God on one day, and a religious lecture on the other." Indeed, while I waited in a hall for a lecture on the benefits of fasting during Ramadan, I saw band members enter from the next hall, singing, and pause with embarrassment at the very different audience here. "The center has a religion filter but not an artistic filter," a playwright friend complained, telling me how a friend of ours had her play on women's sexuality canceled by



Street entrance of Sakia cultural center. Photograph by Sonali Pahwa.

Al-Sawi himself. Meanwhile, concert tickets brought high revenues for the Sakia, and so musicians were allowed more lenient censorship on its stage. The center's guiding rule seemed to be that all audiences were welcome, but no performers could offend and potentially drive people away. This was cultural production with a consumer-friendly face.

Despite the warnings, I found the Sakia refreshingly open and welcoming to visitors. It had an informative, bilingual website, which described the center as “an ethical Egyptian environment that motivates people to develop and strengthen their culture through arts, enlightenment, and creativity.”¹² The administrative offices were open-plan, and young people shuffled through with none of the hierarchical formality I had observed at government institutions. The Sakia had only three full-time managers, and it hired young college graduates to edit the magazine and staff the research center. When I put my head around a door to ask about scheduling an appointment with the theater programmer, a smiling young man made a quick call. I was pleasantly shocked when he told me that the programmer, Ahmed Ramzi, could meet with me in fifteen minutes.



Riverside garden of Sakia cultural center. Photograph by Sonali Pahwa.

Ramzi sat down with me at a hallway table to explain his role in curating the theater program. “We can’t rule on the artistic value of a theater troupe—your standard may be high, low, or medium,” he said. “The artistic work is seen and justifies itself on stage.”¹³ The Sakia simply asked troupes to pay a minimum of 500 Egyptian pounds for rent and granted them the remainder of their ticket proceeds. What my dramatist friends decried as a commercial policy was likewise an open selection process that did not require access to state officials or influential critics. Amateur troupes took advantage of it and rented the stage for short runs of inventive productions, of uneven quality, for small audiences dominated by friends and family. Theater critics were rarely seen at Sakia plays, except during the center’s annual summer theater festival. Its amateur reputation and family-friendly policies made many avant-gardists skeptical. After all, Ramzi said he had to “make sure there are no insults of people, transgressions of decency in clothing, or anything that might blemish the Sakia’s reputation.” Amateur productions here were accordingly respectful of aesthetic decorum, even if some plays were pointedly critical.

When I saw the center’s quarterly magazine *Paper Sakia* (*Al-saqia al-waraqiya*), it became clear to me that the Sakia had a different definition of culture from that of my avant-garde friends. The colorful, glossy “cultural magazine” was filled with articles on civil society initiatives and Arab



Art class at Sakia cultural center. Photograph by Sonali Pahwa.

historical figures, and it included just a handful of reviews of contemporary theater, art, and literature. “What is culture? Does it have to do only with the arts?” retorted Injy el-Batrawy, the young editor of the magazine, when I asked her about the focus on social issues. “There is a strong relationship to society. We present information and knowledge.”¹⁴ Considerable research had gone into writing informational articles that aimed to inspire contemporary Egyptian youth. The summer 2008 *Paper Sakia* featured an article on a 1933 Anglo-Egyptian research mission in maritime sciences, an advice column by a psychologist, a story on a cyclists’ club in Cairo, and an article calling for the preservation of Alexandria’s architectural heritage. Al-Sawi wrote opening columns for each issue, and this one delivered a stinging critique of young Egyptian men who harassed women on the street, stole, or cursed. His title played on the colloquial expression “A child is lost!” (*‘ayl ta’ih*), used at crowded fairs, to argue that “reason is lost” (*‘aql ta’ih*). He faulted Egyptian parents and authority figures for failing to guide young people. Images of cosmopolitan, socially engaged youth in the magazine, some in Islamic clothing, put a face on the kind of ethical youth culture his center was seeking to promote.

The Sakia translated the concept of clean entertainment from the Islamist cultural movement for “purposeful art” (*al-fann al-hadif*) into a studiously

neutral program that sidestepped debates about the relationship between piety and ethical culture in contemporary Egypt.¹⁵ It aligned with a rising Islamist cultural wave that promoted moderate beliefs and democratized ideology around the 2005 presidential election, where the Muslim Brotherhood ended up with strong gains. One summer evening in 2008, I stopped by the Sakia to find a group of excited young women awaiting a lecture by heart-throb televangelist Mostafa Hosni. The center's eclectic repertoire of youth culture visibly attracted a more conservative middle-class demographic than the usual secular-oriented Cairo arts venue, which was marked by clouds of cigarette smoke, bohemian outfits, and casual cross-gender interactions. In addition to fostering different styles of embodying modern personhood, it offered training workshops that echoed Islamic youth culture programs in claiming to build ethical discipline.

The Sakia's monthly schedule of events that summer featured a weekly meeting of a vaguely titled "youth workshop" that kindled my curiosity about how educational programs aligned with theater and music at this venue. I found the workshop to be a large affair, for which the spacious River Hall was set up with about two hundred folding chairs. A steady trickle of young men and women came through the hall to occupy these, and they sat in gender-segregated sections by unspoken agreement. There was little of the flirting and chatting I associated with student gatherings. Instead, two young women seated next to me studied lists of English vocabulary as they waited for the lecturer to set up his slideshow presentation on stage. His first slide showed the website of Ma'an, the organization offering today's free workshop, which it also held at Cairo University and the agricultural college. The lecturer, Gawad, wore a suit and tie, like a corporate executive, but spoke with the rapid-fire enthusiasm of a youth group leader. Smiling and personable, he offered his phone number to anyone who wished to speak further with him. He also introduced a representative from the Islamic educational nonprofit Resala who was seeking volunteers for that organization. But today's workshop had nothing to do with religion: it was about taking standardized American tests like the GMAT and SAT. I was puzzled to find these woven into a personal development workshop, until the lecturer began his inspirational ethical discourse.

"You know that all companies make you take these tests when you apply for a job nowadays," Gawad noted, explaining to college students that their summer vacation was a time to work on their professional skills. He proceeded to drill them on GMAT test questions for two hours. My neighbors bent their heads industriously over workbooks, heedless of the August heat, which was thickened by the crowd in the lecture hall. They were learning the discipline of a new youth culture of constant education. "There is no stupid or intelligent person," Gawad said to motivate them. "There is only training and practice." Every now and then, when test questions grew difficult and the frustration palpable, Gawad told anecdotes about graduates

of Ma'an workshops who had done so well on aptitude tests administered by multinational corporations that they got jobs above their qualifications. These stories were supported by testimonials on the Ma'an website. Under the declaration that it was possible to "remake yourself" (*yatakawwan 'alayk marattan ukhra*), the website featured success stories of young graduates of the workshop who had changed career paths. A law student called Iman had taken classes in finance and was hired at an international oil company. Rihab worked as a volunteer with Ma'an, then organized a lecture series that encouraged others to assume social responsibility. An entrepreneurial spirit had enabled these exemplary young people to adapt to a new Egyptian economy through an educational detour that built up their work ethic.

Like the volunteer organization Resala, Ma'an cultivated a youth culture of socially responsible citizenship.¹⁶ Gawad argued that taking classes over the summer holidays was a social contribution, as he exhorted: "I should ask myself, how can I help my nation and my religion?" Concepts of culture and education intertwined at Sakia workshops, highlighting the double valence of the Arabic term *al-thaqafa*, which could refer to a level of education or knowledge of arts. What was strikingly new in its version of the culture concept was the emphasis on self-guided learning. Gawad talked about education as a personal discipline and an ongoing process that would make young people better members of their society. The material and ethical dimensions of self-improvement were linked somewhat abstractly in Ma'an's discourse, however. The organization's website featured quotes from the Qur'an and a page of ethical dialogues that would have been at home in evangelical literature. "I don't seem to have a goal in life, or be able to define what I want," stated the "questioner." The "guide" responded, "Seek your goal diligently and persistently, like our master Abraham. Ma'an guides you one day a week. For the rest, you must go elsewhere to learn and gain experience . . . You are the only person who can define your own goals." Middle-class youth participating in programs that bolstered their own career prospects were taught to see themselves as part of a corporate-style ethical economy in which productivity was a spiritual duty.¹⁷

Personal development workshops with a religious bent built on the Islamic prayer movement of a previous decade, with its discourse of self-guided scriptural education and ritual practice.¹⁸ However, the newer workshops decentered the body in their practices of ethical discipline. Instead, concepts of motivation from translated self-help books found their way into the vocabulary of lecturers, who asked only that their audiences *listen* for inspiration. The *Paper Sakia* similarly featured stories of Egyptian youth, past and present, as encouraging parables. The magazine never, in my reading, featured discussion of the class and educational privileges that underpinned the achievements of such inspiring youth. Its carefully chosen narratives of success fashioned a more utopian vision of youth to counter the dispiriting news of unemployment in contemporary Egypt. However, these scripts of ethical youth culture were tested

when personal development workshops promised a path to upward economic mobility. Bringing specifically trained bodies into stories of self-improvement showed that they had different mobilities, in a society rife with gender and class prejudice.

At the opening night of Sakia's theater festival in July 2009, audiences sat down to a play on a familiar theme: the difficulty of finding jobs as young college graduates. It opened with a stylized tug-of-war between "the youth" and a lone adult, "the functionary" (*al-mas'ul*). Comic sketches followed the solemn scene, all set in classrooms where teachers miseducated and harangued their students. The longest skit was about a bright young woman who graduated college with top grades and looked forward to being appointed a teaching assistant (*mu'ida*). However, the plum job went unfairly to a privileged child of professors. Lacking work experience or connections, the young woman contemplated a job as a shop clerk with measly pay. The rest of the student characters ended up as street vendors or beggars who pretended to be blind.

The struggle against an impenetrable job market received a more hopeful staging in a career training workshop at the Sakia that summer called *Al-'amal ibada* (Work Is Worship). Workshop organizer Reem was a corporate executive who wanted to share her experience with young jobseekers, whom she advised on self-presentation and workplace norms. She was a stylish woman with a westernized appearance, and evidently a tough-minded mentor. Reem wrote on the blackboard, "Do the dreams of youth correspond with their skills, education, and abilities?" This was meant to be a rhetorical question: she was here to teach realistic dreaming, in contrast to motivational speakers who urged youth to aim high. In order to do so, she organized lectures by corporate professionals, as well as occasional public meetings between these professionals and young jobseekers. Today, she recounted one such meeting at which potential employers complained about young people's lack of experience, and jobseekers felt sidelined because they did not have the right look for corporate workplaces. Women who wore Islamic headscarves had particular complaints about discrimination. Reem wanted to bridge the gap of expectations by bringing in a series of guest speakers as "models from society who made an effort and succeeded."

Today's guest, Lamia, was a striking counterpoint to the disillusioned protagonist of the play. Introduced as an English literature graduate, she wore a modest headscarf and professional but not fashionable clothing. She had always been interested in office work, and she sought out summer jobs, since a college degree did not teach all that was needed for a job. "No, I must still develop myself," Lamia affirmed. One summer internship found her at Reem's office, where her work ethic made such a good impression that Lamia secured a permanent job here. She did not disclose whether the job was administrative (as I guessed) or managerial. Lamia's story resonated with Reem's suggestion that youth should moderate their dreams to fit their skills, and, implicitly, their class backgrounds. Like devout Muslims for whom

self-realization and personal modesty went hand in hand, the office worker took pride in accomplishing modest goals. She modulated her expectations to the kind of job in which her educational and class background slotted her. Since jobs at multinational corporations called for expensive bilingual education, a middle-class college graduate often had better chances of moving *across* professions than up the corporate ladder. Lamia's shift from studying literature to working in an office demonstrated that flexibility was a valued means of mobility in this neoliberal economy.

It was telling that the workshop title, *Work Is Worship*, framed work as a virtue for its own sake. Personal development programs that borrowed such vocabulary from Islamic self-help found it to fit well with neoliberal concepts of self-management. Young people's enterprise should not be too ambitious or speculative; it should fit within a structured social order. Middle-class young Egyptians who flocked to personal development workshops, volunteer organizations, and motivational lectures were joining networks that facilitated the smoother working of that social order. Here they acquired textual and embodied knowledge that helped them play the role of responsible middle-class citizens. Free workshops were more democratic means of distributing such knowledge than elite private schools, and yet they could only boost cultural capital to a limited extent. They cultivated a shared ethic of middle-class aspiration, and complemented neoliberal ideologies of personal enterprise with informal networks of sharing and solidarity.

Compared with other cultural spaces in Cairo, the Sakia was remarkably inclusive of class and educational backgrounds, religious and secular orientations, and diverse cultural repertoires. Its eclectic program also made it a space where contradictions of middle-class youth culture in the late Mubarak era were visibly on display. A culture of idealistic self-help coexisted with structural obstacles to upward mobility, such as an inadequate number of middle-class jobs for youth. And avant-garde theater was censored to suit the supposedly conservative tastes of the center's middle-class audience. Yet the Sakia remained a rare space for fostering a shared youth culture in such a divided urban society. Its location in upscale Zamalek, and accessible Nile-side gardens, allowed it to stage a utopian version of a new style of cultural institution. The free workshops and inexpensive magazine furthered that impression. It repurposed an unused piece of urban space to fashion a vision of new civil society where secularist and Islamist cultural repertoires coexisted. In the utopian absence of cultural hierarchies, youth were encouraged to imagine self-improvement as a means of national development. The lack of ideology for which my theater friends faulted the Sakia thus enabled a broad-based (if rather puritan) redefinition of culture outside norms inherited from the state cultural establishment.

Received definitions of culture encompassed an expanding repertoire at this historical moment in Egypt, and within the Sakia's eclectic program in particular. In large part, this was a result of the shifting definition of the

cultural worker. In the economy of what Maurizio Lazzarato calls immaterial labor, the autonomous worker blurs boundaries between laborer and entrepreneur; his or her work gains value depending on the economic or social networks that tap it.¹⁹ Cairo's personal development workshops tapped the labor of various cultural workers, from traditional artists to corporate and Islamist trainers, in their emerging redefinition of cultural education. They generated a cultural infrastructure that became particularly active in projects of social uplift after the 2011 revolution.²⁰ It was broadly defined by a hopeful, even utopian, culture of spiritual development and self-fashioning. Meanwhile, the fact that these workshops remained identified as *cultural* and not *educational* institutions highlighted the inability of autonomous cultural workers to bridge material gaps of opportunity between Egyptian youth of different social classes. In particular, personal development workshops that did not account for economic and educational hierarchies were limited in their imagination of art as a means of social change. To expand on this last point, I offer as my final example an acting workshop that staged cross-class cultural exchange explicitly as an ethical practice.

Embodying Ethical Class Relations in Volunteer Culture

Personal development workshops largely remained enclosed within the middle-class neighborhoods where private acting studios and cultural centers were located. These were spaces for self-care and skill building, for members of a social class embattled in times of rising inequality. As personal development culture grew, it intersected with the work of nongovernmental organizations that used the tools of microenterprise and microcredit to cast working-class Cairenes as "agents of their own empowerment."²¹ In fact, self-help ideologies came to these working-class groups years before the current trend of personal development. A handful of cultural workers lent their labor to such projects across metropolitan and marginal venues. Among them was my friend Sameh, the independent theater actor turned acting coach, whose religious beliefs fostered a strong commitment to social work. In 2009, he was teaching classes for middle-class children at the private Markaz al-Ajyal (Generations Center) in Al-Doqqi and at a mosque in distant Tenth of Ramadan City. He also volunteered at the Shughlan school in Old Cairo's Al-Darb Al-Ahmar neighborhood. Sameh and his wife, Hind Samir Mohamed, had both benefited from arts workshops and wanted to pass on such opportunities to less privileged, working children who attended the school. Their inclusive concept of culture, and experience at a range of venues, made them optimistic about teaching outside a middle-class milieu.

Hind was a particularly energetic recruiter for the Shughlan school's arts program in Al-Darb Al-Ahmar. She was a fine arts graduate who had worked as a saleswoman during college, and prided herself on getting along with people

across social backgrounds. As we walked through the neighborhood after the workshop, Hind greeted several shop owners who knew her from prior volunteer work. She pointed out the mother-and-child association where she had served, and navigated muddy paths with ease despite being several months pregnant. It was a neighborhood of craftsmen's and mechanics' workshops, and Sameh mentioned that the arts program animators (*munashshatin*) found it difficult to persuade parents to send their children to the educational workshops. "Some of the parents of working children approve, but others only want their sons to bring home money," he explained. Those who did come to the workshop on their days off from work did so "out of a love of discovery and knowledge." Sameh regretted that working-class families did not see the benefit of giving their children better opportunities, but he had faith that the children themselves recognized the value of knowledge. In the Shughlan's arts program, Sameh and his fellow volunteers worked to bridge the class gap between visions of children's potential by showing participants the educational value of art.

The four-week Shughlan arts workshop during Ramadan in 2009 included acting, music, and drawing workshops taught by arts graduates and assisted by student volunteers. Hind taught some of the drawing lessons, and Sameh supervised Shadi, who led the acting workshop for adolescent boys. Approximately ten to sixteen years old, the boys trooped into the Shughlan building with manly wisecracks and swearing. Two young women standing on the sidelines were scandalized and reprimanded them gently. I learned that they were volunteers at the art therapy program but business students themselves. Shadi began the acting workshop by explaining that today's class would rehearse and reflect on everyday physical practices. His first drill for the boys asked them to choose three distinct expressions to perform. They enacted angry, sad, and, to their instructor's chagrin, intoxicated (*mastul*). He tried to evoke more appropriate emotions by offering a scenario in which a boy went out to buy food for his family and accidentally dropped the money on his way. Few such childlike scripts appealed to the working boys, who earned their own income. Sameh explained, however, that the exercises were designed to get them into an imaginative space he called "the magic box" (*al-sandūq al-sibri*). "The idea is to express themselves so they can learn how to change."

Shadi focused on embodied habits, working to channel the boys' swaggering movements in artful ways. He asked them to imagine, for instance, walking on burning sand. The scenes composed from these movements were more controlled than the boys' everyday body language, which remained boisterous. Shadi regularly disciplined them for talking or laughing loudly. "Those who don't know how to be men are not my problem!" he scolded. His middle-class standards of masculinity were clearly different from those that prevailed in the craftsmen's milieu, where these boys' economic contributions made them men. Yet Sameh thought they were learning the value of modulating their behaviors to middle-class norms. He listed their achievements a few

weeks in: “They now knock on doors, swear less, and let us know if they’re going to be absent.” The boys’ growing (and perhaps grudging) respect for their trainers showed that acting techniques had indeed brought flexibility to their embodied repertoires.

Transposing acting techniques from middle-class contexts into the acting workshop for working adolescent boys highlighted the ways in which these cultivated obedient physicality. Shadi used acting techniques to train well-mannered bodies that would be an asset for young men who went to work in a middle-class milieu. Learning to act appropriately in an educational setting appeared as flexibility in the Studio Emadeddin improvisation workshop but as an affirmation of social inequities at Shughlan. The class bias of identity performance at different personal development workshops was clearly visible here. They taught educated youth to adapt flexibly to people of different backgrounds, but consistently assigned working-class youth to deferential roles. While Shadi scolded the boys and Sameh preferred to counsel them individually, both instructors agreed that training this set of workshop participants required more discipline than they were used to imposing. Drawing working-class youth into the acting workshop introduced them to an aesthetic order that reproduced a class-based vision of social hierarchy. It enacted the immaterial labor of transferring cultural capital through paradoxically belittling gestures and physical forms of discipline.

The motivated middle-class youth represented in personal development literature, such as the *Paper Sakia* magazine, required training of their own to enable them to instruct others in social work programs. Upstairs from the courtyard where Shadi taught the acting workshop, Sameh led a Training of Trainers workshop (*Tadrib al-Mudarrabin*) attended by five student volunteers. They sat around a desk as soothing Turkish music played and Sameh urged them to work through their own problems so they could deal better with the children. He launched the session by telling inspirational fables and asking participants to contemplate ethical questions. I was surprised to hear no practical advice on teaching skills. Instead, Sameh urged the volunteers to develop self-knowledge before helping others, emphasizing that the two were related. “If you help people, you will feel your life has meaning,” he advised.

The self-help exercises here were framed in a language of spirituality. Sameh drew the outline of a body on the board and traced a spirit (*al-ruh*) within, saying, “You have spirit, and can give it to others in your work and dealings with them. Spirit is not just religion! It also means harmony with the self.” Participants listened to Sameh’s parables, closed their eyes to think positive thoughts, and absorbed his ideas about how they must better themselves if they wanted their society to change. He mobilized spiritual concepts to frame the labor of volunteers as ethical practice, aimed as much at giving them a sense of purpose as at helping less advantaged youth. While Sameh’s own strong sense of social justice drove his service at the school, alongside his paid work, the younger volunteers treated their attendance as a summer

internship. The language of personal development at this workshop gestured at an emerging ethical culture in which middle-class youth helped working-class peers while also engaging in self-help. Instead of furthering their own careers, the volunteers were told they were here to improve their society. The infrastructure for that improvement was still abstract, however, making for an educational experiment limited to teaching middle-class manners.

The workshops at Shughlan, a hybrid of personal development and volunteer culture, staged some paradoxes of cultural outreach in the late Mubarak era. Volunteers brought to their social work ethical concepts that clearly originated in middle-class artistic and religious discourses. Cairo college students, in particular, performed a certain moral and aesthetic authority as adults from an educated middle class. The personal development culture within which they played these roles was a space of utopian class relations. As their lessons at the Training of Trainers sessions reflected, the idealized citizen of this space was culturally invested in building a new society that centered his or her vision of the nation. Ethical culture remained a middle-class institution in this repertoire of citizenship, which gestured at a new society where all citizens shared the same notion of ethics.

In Gilles Deleuze's formulation of social control in contemporary societies, individual modulation of power replaces external discipline: "Just as the corporation replaces the factory, *perpetual training* tends to replace the school."²² At the different personal development workshops, modulation took distinct forms for middle-class youth and others, showing that the figure of the ethical citizen was not as flexible as self-help discourse would suggest. Belief in the ability to modulate one's performance through workshops was founded on middle-class norms of stylized embodiment, including those of gender performance. Working-class youth who were deemed resistant to the discipline of that norm received stern scoldings, while their instructors were asked simply to self-regulate and harmonize their personas with role models from parables. The bodies of social subalterns offered more resistant material for personal development techniques. Acting workshops made the cultural limits of this self-help movement particularly visible and tangible. Nevertheless, the new social bonds rehearsed in gestures of outreach traced a potential network of more ethical social relations across class divides. They showed that turning personal development into a force for social change required cross-class networks to channel the labor of volunteers into a transformative culture of ethical citizenship.

Ethics and Aesthetics of Citizenship in Neoliberal Cultural Institutions

In apartment studios and repurposed urban spaces, a new cultural infrastructure emerged in Cairo in the last years of the Mubarak era. I often heard avant-garde artists dismiss the new institutions as business enterprises, even

as their founders spoke in familiar terms of art as a means of social uplift. Theirs was a language that hybridized the terminology of the Muslim “new preachers,” who urged ethical social practice, with that of state cultural institutions that claimed the mission of cultivating modern identity through arts. Religious lectures thus coexisted with music concerts in new cultural institutions, while corporate trainers repurposed spiritual self-help discourse in personal development workshops. As cultural producers with different missions drew from the same repertoires, they bridged older divides between theater and social work and between religious and secular culture, whether or not they intended to do so. New cultural institutions thus gestured beyond the aesthetic practices of state institutions, with their focus on European-style modernism, to imagine what a more plural form of national culture might look like. The performance repertoires they produced were high-mindedly abstract and intentionally ethical.

In emerging genres of personal development, Cairo actors found new avenues for their skills in teaching arts of self-presentation and ensemble performance. The demands of self-modulation in the neoliberal economy were well served by theatrical techniques such as improvisation. Even self-help coaches without any acting training used a language of working on the self that echoed (or even cited) concepts of rehearsal and performance. However, the limits of imaginative embodiment as a means of professional mobility became clear when workplace scenarios were enacted as theater, such as in the *Work Is Worship* workshop. The globalized corporate economy was deeply exclusionary, and jobseekers ran up against class barriers regularly. University graduates who raised questions of exclusion on aesthetic grounds, such as that experienced by women wearing hijabs, found no satisfying answers at the personal development workshops I attended. They were instructed simply to work on improving themselves and to modulate their expectations, in an echo of narratives of self-control in the contemporary Islamic revival. The workshops that hybridized translated self-help literature and Muslim evangelists’ practices with secular culture concepts thus left unanswered the question of how to turn such inclusive culture into material opportunity.

Questions of class and gender performance raised in personal development workshops added useful nuances to theories of self-making in neoliberal economic discourses. At a time when self-help manuals and books translated from English promised to teach “soft skills” by molding the self to fit a professional persona, acting workshops made clear the limits of such self-modulation in a polarized society. They also demonstrated experimental solutions to bridging cultural divides to some extent. Arts-based workshops that built aesthetic versions of more inclusive and ethical communities could be seen as anticipating a new society. Achieving this in practice would, of course, require significant structural reforms. A preliminary gesture in this respect was the rebuilding of cultural infrastructure by independent dramatists such as Ahmed el-Attar

and entrepreneurs like Muhammad al-Sawi. They took advantage of what many saw as an alarming absence of state support for culture in order to rethink cultural production as a more grassroots enterprise. The workshops and performances that their initiatives produced raised the question of how to reconceptualize national culture when state secularism and socialism were no longer hegemonic.

When Egypt's Ministry of Culture was established in 1956, it funded theater that echoed aesthetics of secularist modern citizenship. As the decades went on, the ministry and General Organization of Cultural Palaces continued to reproduce cultural ideologies that were no longer supported by material benefits, such as jobs in the state sector. New arts workshops at various personal development programs in the late Mubarak era attempted to reconcile cultural and economic norms of citizenship once again, promoting more remunerative repertoires of contemporary culture. Despite being rooted in enduring class divides, the collaborative new cultural workshops staged a hopeful path to economic opportunity and offered young middle-class Cairenes faith in the future. In its utopian form, personal development culture revived the idea of youth as a time of hope. As Cairo college graduates struggled to find jobs, they gravitated toward educational programs that fostered hope through what Lauren Berlant terms an "optimism of manners, composure, a formalism of being."²³ Often, encouraging such investments in the future was cruel, in Berlant's term, as job opportunities remained scarce. Yet they generated cultural dynamism amid a widespread feeling of political and economic stasis in the middle classes.

Another way to see sites for personal development training is as networks of cultural activity that rehabilitated historical ideals of culture as a means of self-improvement and upward mobility. They gave youth the means and opportunity to rehearse the role of the responsible citizen. Acting as if they had a place in the new economy, middle-class dramatists and cultural activists demonstrated their capacities for leadership and organization. As private versions of the state-sponsored public relations campaigns that Maysoun Sukarieh calls "hope crusades," personal development programs built more citizen-centered narratives of national hope.²⁴ Youth in these workshops resembled dramatists in independent theater in devising speculative narratives of imagined citizenship. Several participants considered the workshops sites of ethical reflection and self-knowledge, no less than their peers who followed the lectures of new televangelists and undertook volunteer work for religious organizations. Their practices were performative, in the sense of generating potential social identities, and figured a social future in concretely embodied terms. It is in this sense that I analyze personal development workshops as performances of a new cultural citizenship, which spanned a wide Egyptian middle class in the late Mubarak era. Adding an ethical twist to neoliberal notions of enterprise, these workshops taught repertoires of social engagement that were widely enacted during the days of revolution.

Chapter 6



Remembering Utopia

Social Theater and Arts Festivals after 2011

On January 25, 2011, the streets and squares of downtown Cairo became a giant stage for political theater. Television footage showed scenes of soccer ultras chanting antipolice fight songs and families with small children waving flags in the carnivalesque spirit of a long-awaited revolution. A stunning range of popular discontentment with the Mubarak regime became visible in the performances that appeared onscreen as a coordinated spectacle of dissent. The Tahrir Square occupation had clearly interrupted the optics of dictatorial power by “occupying the medium and creating the message.”¹ For my leftist Egyptian friends who participated in the eighteen-day uprising, it was etched in memory less as a visual spectacle than as a utopian community where they met people from different class and ideological backgrounds. Upper-class activists and trade union members, Islamists and secularists stood shoulder to shoulder for the first time in the memory of many citizens. Friends mourned this remembered revolutionary commons after Hosni Mubarak stepped down and Tahrir was cleared of protest tents. They cherished the occupied square as a “symbolic resistance text.”² Meanwhile, citizens from the political center celebrated it as the site of a “civilized revolution” in which Egyptians were seen at their most ethical.³ When security forces scrubbed the graffiti and banned demonstrators from Tahrir, political radicals and law-abiding patriots alike wondered how to reembody the ethics of revolution outside that exceptional space and time.

As I watched the events on Al-Jazeera television with Egyptian friends in Doha, Qatar, we hardly recognized fractious Cairo in this spectacle of unity. Our social media were similarly alight with hope. “That’s what you call a revolution, sons of bitches!” a usually cynical friend enthused on Facebook on January 28, when protesters pushed the police off the streets. After eighteen days of protest forced President Mubarak to step down, however, Egyptians hotly debated the question of what constituted a revolution. “The people want the downfall of the regime” had been a unifying slogan of the January and February 2011 protests. While ideological divisions between

the people hardened, artists and intellectuals contemplated how to distill memories of the revolution into embodied scenarios that could revive its utopian solidarity.

How indeed had a divided citizenry found public cultural repertoires with which to stage a collective revolution? After decades of dictatorship and police monitoring their movements, Egyptians now felt freer to act in ways ungoverned by state dramaturgy. Egyptian academics Sahar Keraitim and Samia Mehrez argue that the very act of protesting gave citizens a newfound sense of ownership over public space, pointing out that popular performance genres such as the *zaffa* (musical procession) from saints' fairs were repurposed in Tahrir Square as repertoires of revolutionary community.⁴ After the carnival of revolution, when police cleared protesters mercilessly from squares, these politicized popular repertoires endured mainly in memory. An online media archive preserved that collective memory in the months of military crackdown that followed the events of early 2011. Iconic scenes of protest were memorialized in YouTube videos, such as that of marchers halting on Qasr al-Nil Bridge to pray in rows under the spray from police water cannons, or that of the bold young man who stood in front of a military tank rolling through a Cairo street. Meanwhile, both state and private television networks packaged the images from the anti-Mubarak protests into patriotic scenes, framed with flag symbols and nationalist music.

When I visited Cairo in May 2011, friends in the independent theater world insisted that the revolution was not over. There was still political and cultural work to be done to sustain calls for social change in a city where less radical residents were eager to get back to work and restart "the wheel of production." As the new military rulers declared the revolution a mission accomplished, dramatists joined activists in efforts to resurrect the cultural repertoires of its utopian community. This chapter analyzes a new avant-garde genre of 2012–14, the popular public performance, as one such cultural repertoire of revolutionary life. Staged in urban streets or squares, these shows activated everyday forms of community to evoke the solidarity of the Tahrir protests. In counterrevolutionary times, activists were only legally permitted to stage small, apolitical gatherings in public. Street performers managed to fashion scenes of heterogeneous and hospitable community within these limits. I describe two examples: a 2012 public arts festival and a 2014 clown show for Syrian refugees. Each evoked "the people" (*al-sha'b*) of utopian revolutionary memory through the use of folksy rituals and performance styles, as well as street-side locations. The self-styled revolutionary festival Al-Fann Midan (Art Is an Open Square) evoked the remembered space of Tahrir with its mix of people and arts. Meanwhile, the clown show *1, 2 . . . 5!* staged a more open-ended utopian community, moving from an event for Syrian refugees to a performance in an Alexandria neighborhood. By reembodying festive forms of community in public, they pushed against the official closure of the revolutionary narrative.

After the end of regular protests, the emerging genre of popular urban performance interrupted the flow of quotidian life with glimpses of utopian time. Instead of re-creating scenes of revolution, these performances simply aimed to attract audiences across social and cultural divides. The avant-gardists who had developed performance gestures to challenge conventions of communication onstage now interjected unexpected gestures of utopian community in city streets that had returned to conventional sociality. And as counterrevolutionary regimes cracked down on protests, these transposable performances had the advantage of evading security. They recast theatrical repertoires as popular street actions, fashioning a style of revolutionary populism that offered an alternative to media nationalism. I analyze utopian stagings of “the people” in these shows through José Esteban Muñoz’s version of the distinction between abstract and concrete utopias, the former complete and ahistorical, the latter indeterminate and potential.⁵ Art Is an Open Square ritually transposed the utopia of Tahrir into a festive time and space, while the clown show that traveled across venues left its scenarios of revolutionary community more open.⁶ I hope to show that gestures of mutual recognition between participants in such gatherings revealed as much about revolutionary community as did the occasional mass protests after the 2011 uprising.⁷ By staging inclusion through gestures of hospitality, these modest performances kept the utopian category of “the people” open and allowed it to evolve.

In the aftermath of the uprising, my dramatist friends were unusually optimistic about the future of the independent theater they had sustained through oppressive and corrupt state bureaucracies. Now they saw an opportunity to turn their vision for democratic cultural production into official practice. They formed the Independent Culture Coalition in alliance with cultural managers and held several planning meetings, one of which I attended in May 2011. Dancers, musicians, and dramatists gathered in eclectic discussion groups, and staunchly Marxist nationalists chatted with their political opposites, artists funded by the U.S.-based Ford Foundation. “We are moving toward a democratic civil society,” argued eminent artist Mohamed Abla before the assembly of the coalition. “How can we respond culturally to the spirit of the revolution?” The solution, organizers agreed after lengthy discussion, was to use popular arts to replicate the alliance that had been formed between cultural elites and other citizens during the Tahrir occupation. New concepts of “the people” voiced in these discussions appeared more advanced than in official political debates at the time, which were deadlocked between Islamist and secularist ideologues.

Independent artists sought to uncover the revolutionary social potential that endured outside the strictly policed sites of the political uprising. They planned to activate this potential through performance in popular venues, which could stand for their vision of utopian community. Their vision of utopia in the present resonated with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s concept of the “utopic commonunderground [*sic*] of dystopia,” an imaginative space

created by fugitive intellectuals escaping official cultural ideology.⁸ Independent Egyptian artists were fugitives from the counterrevolutionary regime in the sense of evading police crackdowns, as well as in their idealistic quest to sustain revolutionary communities. Making their idealistic vision concrete in occasional performances, they created spaces in which utopian ideas permeated everyday repertoires of practice. I analyze the stylized movements and gestures by which these performances staged social interaction. Unlike dramatic scenarios, which required a specialized theater space, these everyday enactments staged community in ways that adapted to spatial context, turning the necessity of fugitive performance into a virtue. The two case studies that I compare used public performance to stage community in different ways, with the enclosed square and open street as their respective sites. Their strategies for interrupting normal social relations built on popular performance repertoires and fashioned them into utopian scenarios.

As independent theater reached out to wider and more popular audiences, its performances appeared in streets and squares as tentative gestures to cautious onlookers. These transplanted critical theater from authorized venues to new contexts, inviting a focus on their reception, or what James M. Harding and John Rouse term “the performative gesture” of *avant-gardism* rather than its formal style.⁹ Such gestures also tested the extent to which social solidarity endured after the revolution, despite its political disappointments. It was new territory for independent dramatists accustomed to protecting their performances from publics they deemed culturally conservative. Generating performance space from urban public space entailed a more flexible negotiation of boundaries between actors and spectators. The dramatists made particularly adept use of bodily gesture to create these charged spaces out of brief interactions in public. The theoretical and physical notions of gesture complemented each other aptly as independent dramatists moved to new terrain.

Anthropologists Julia Elyachar and Michael Herzfeld each describe how public gestures elicit reciprocal responses without a necessary verbal exchange, opening secondary channels of either normative or intimate communication.¹⁰ The Egyptian performers in my case studies made extensive use of such gestures to engage with audiences in public and elicit reciprocal acts for signaling alliance.¹¹ Their street shows used a broad repertoire of gestures to rehearse alternative modes of communication in public, taking utopian ideas about community into concrete scenarios of stranger sociality at a fair or on the street. Since these everyday performances had open-ended scenarios and depended on audience engagement, their stagings of utopian community were liable to fail. They also changed in dialogue with different audiences. Thus, they offer instructive examples of the ways in which utopian communities could be instantiated in postuprising Egyptian contexts. In a pragmatic version of Harney and Moten’s romance of fugitivity, then, I examine the performative workings of secondary communication through

gestures reciprocated and refused. Where was the utopian community welcomed into the urban fabric, and where could it not travel?

In the performances I analyze, conventional social scenarios of insider-outsider relations significantly shaped the audience's reception of the performers' utopian gestures of community. Theatrical performers might be figured in a pedagogical scenario as high-status teachers but in a street show as wandering outsiders of unknown value. The scenarios into which their gestures were folded brought audiences to recognize them in accordance with their conventions of response. Such recognition was, in Juana Maria Rodriguez's terms, "an intimate, social, and political gesture, a practice of engagement, never complete, always in the moment."¹² Reading gesture in this double sense illuminates the cultural politics enacted in concrete exchanges that might otherwise appear as mere street entertainment. Public performances that disrupted neighborhood life, inviting audiences to recognize outsiders and situate them with respect to the community, enacted new understandings of "the people." The gestures of recognition or refusal that the independent dramatists encountered showed the extent to which their utopian scenarios resonated with their audience. If no physical response was forthcoming, the performance utopia remained a relatively abstract spectacle. The most successful performances aligned with repertoires of everyday hospitality, eliciting quotidian gestures that fit into their scenarios. They showed that street theater was a means of blurring boundaries between the theatrical and the everyday and staging revolutionary scenarios outside the limited sphere of politics.¹³

Reviving Scenarios of the Revolutionary Square

Cairo's Tahrir Square, like Martyrs' Square in Port Said and the Corniche in Alexandria, was an iconic site for revolutionaries who cherished the memory of gathering with fellow citizens there. There were several attempts to resurrect scenes from Tahrir in documentary dramas throughout 2011.¹⁴ Independent director Dalia Basiouny wrote that her performance *Stories from Tahrir* aimed at conveying a feeling of the square to those who did not join protests, and reviving the memories of those who did.¹⁵ Sondos Shabayek, of the feminist storytelling project Bussy, based her hugely successful *Tahrir Monologues* on first-person accounts from participants in the February occupation of Tahrir. These performances served as a "reservoir against cynicism," writes Margaret Litvin, for members of the intellectual community who attended in a celebratory spirit.¹⁶ However, she notes that re-creating Tahrir scenarios onstage was not necessarily a means of taking revolutionary sentiment forward; documentary dramas praising the revolution tended to bury it by consigning political anger to the past. Where participating in the revolution during its active stage had entailed "embodied act(s) of doing something

that could make a difference,” in Samuli Schielke’s words, commemorative performances tended to cast viewers as passive spectators.¹⁷ There was little hope of re-creating those scenarios in public spaces, which were now heavily policed and guarded against protest. My revolutionary friends thus spoke dismissively of the trend for celebratory Tahrir dramas, although state theaters welcomed them.

One documentary drama did win acclaim in the independent theater world. Laila Soliman’s *No Time for Art* bucked the celebratory trend by inviting recognition of police brutality after Mubarak’s resignation. The performance, which I saw in June 2011, recounted the violence inflicted on revolutionaries who tried to hold down the square and use it as a stage for political action after the eighteen days of sanctioned uprising. Audiences entering the small Rawabet Theater in downtown Cairo were handed yellow stickers for the campaign against military trials for civilians, which could also be seen on lampposts across downtown. The show opened with the Egyptian national anthem. Three actors sat before a video screen on which scenes of television footage from the revolution played, and they narrated stories of violence after the euphoria. Among the testimonies acted onstage was that of Red Tomato actor Aly Sobhy, whom I saw sitting quietly in the back. He had been tortured, his hair shaved off, and his front tooth knocked out by military police clearing Tahrir Square in March. The actor who voiced Sobhy’s bitterly humorous account of the experience created a revolutionary voice in counterpoint to the nostalgic recitation of testimonies in Tahrir dramas. Nesreen Hussein describes *No Time for Art* as a dialogic performance, which audiences were invited to complete, gesturing at a community that might emerge *in* performance rather than one memorialized by it.¹⁸ The use of the present tense in the play re-created the intimacy, intensity, and uncertainty of revolutionary practice. Its dark tone aligned with director Soliman’s anger at the military council’s brutal violence. In her scenario, revolutionary feelings could not be limited to joy or nostalgia.

Reviving the spirit of the revolutionary square, as many dramatists attempted in the days of counterrevolution, required imaginative thinking about what that spirit meant in the present time. Documentary dramas about Tahrir were caught between modes of celebratory and accusatory testimony. A second wave of postrevolution performance unlinked social imagination from the politics of the present, and I analyze them through Muñoz’s framing of concrete utopias. Tahrir Square remained a key reference point in these performances, but it was evoked more allusively than spatially. While documentary dramas evoked historical time, the newer wave of performances used spatial means to re-create the temporality of newfound hope. According to geographer Doreen Massey’s concept of open space as heterogeneous, a plurality of social repertoires in space gestured at an open future in the newer performances.¹⁹ Such concretely utopian concepts of space were visible in the two shows I discuss here. Their respective versions of acting to make a difference

framed everyday urban practices within spaces of symbolic heterogeneity, showing how actors and spectators could embody a community open to a new future. In performance titles like *Art Is an Open Square*, Tahrir endured as a metonym for inclusive spaces of citizenship.

Pluralism and Popular Festivity after Revolution: *Art Is an Open Square* in 2012

The signature project of the Independent Culture Coalition was a monthly arts festival launched in 2011. *Art Is an Open Square* aimed to re-create the lively heterogeneity of the Tahrir Square protests in another space, and extend their communal spirit in time. In the aftermath of the uprising, artists at the coalition meeting had spoken of taking art to every part of the nation and offering it as a free, public right. My notes from the May 2011 meeting were filled with participants' ideas about performing in various town squares, combining jazz and folk styles, and so on. The festival that resulted from these ambitious plans was far more circumscribed. It had a standing date of the first Saturday of every month, and the fixed venue of 'Abdin Square in downtown Cairo, a ten-minute walk from Tahrir. The monthly ritual built on the weekend practice of promenading in the square before a former royal palace, a rare open public space in the lower-middle-class neighborhood. To emphasize the popular and inclusive nature of the arts festival, organizers hung decorative cloth panels, like those at an Egyptian *mulid* (saint's fair), at the entrance of 'Abdin Square. Such fairs took place in the countryside, bringing pilgrims from all over Egypt to pay respects to the saint, shop, and have fun.²⁰ *Art Is an Open Square* evoked the combination of commerce and entertainment at the *mulid*, with vendors of popular snacks as well as elegant crafts, a tent for puppet shows, and a stage for performances at the end of the long square. The coalition's debates about using art to carry the spirit of the revolution had moved from the pedagogical notion of taking art to the people to the goal of assembling a range of popular arts within a city square.

Yet the organizers did assign political significance to the cultural plurality on display at the festival. As audiences entered, they saw a cloth wall pinned with pro-revolution posters and manifestos. This remained present until the last festival edition I attended, in July 2012. That edition coincided with International Nubian Day, and showcased the arts and performances of Egypt's displaced Nubian population, many of whose members lived in the 'Abdin neighborhood. The social plurality on display at *Art Is an Open Square* matched its range of cultural offerings. The novelty of finding a festival that resembled a popular carnival in the heart of Cairo brought curious passersby, middle-class artists, families with children, and bands of young men. Whether or not they read the revolutionary posters, the diverse attendees in the square were placed within a commemorative frame that attributed



Boy band performing at Art Is an Open Square, July 2012. Photograph by Sonali Pahwa.

their presence to the national solidarity that had catalyzed the revolution. As they roamed the square, however, they found different entertainments to cater to various age, gender, and class groups.

As afternoon shaded into twilight, performances onstage and in the square gathered the flow of festivalgoers into circles of spectatorship. Nubian musicians were given the official stage at this edition. A child singer took the microphone first, singing in a powerful voice in Nubian, to the applause of a small audience made up mainly of Nubian families. Younger people joined the well-dressed families by the stage when a boy band came up, singing in Arabic about girls who wore hijabs but showed off their curves in tight pants. There was much applause and laughter for the cheeky lyrics, though two teenage girls near me shook their heads, dressed as they were in that fashion themselves. A similar mix of ages and genders was visible around the more informal, spontaneous performances in the square. The soccer fans known as ultras formed a dance circle, drumming wildly and singing their famous chants from the revolution as decorous middle-class audiences looked on silently. I saw many instances of such silent spectatorship across the square, such as when a circus performer showed off his fire-eating skills for the crowd. The juxtaposition of different performance styles for a mix of



Soccer ultras chanting at Art Is an Open Square, joined by a man with an “I Am Nubian” T-shirt, July 2012. Photograph by Sonali Pahwa.

audiences produced some awkward encounters across class lines in an otherwise warm festival atmosphere.

Middle-class dramatists from the Independent Culture Coalition who attended Art Is an Open Square spoke enthusiastically of the mixed urban demographic that the festival attracted, a marked shift from the usual audiences for art, music, and theater in Cairo’s formal cultural institutions. It seemed to them that every age group and social class was represented at the festival. Moreover, it was unique in including subaltern and unofficial cultural practices, such as soccer chanting. The scenario of the *mulid*-style fair allowed for these popular arts to be folded in and recognized by audiences. This festive microcosm of popular culture attracted large numbers of middle-class artists in 2011, but fewer in 2012. Its diversity, popular tone, and ritualized commemoration of Tahrir served as a re-creation of revolutionary utopia for organizers so long as it mirrored their contemporary vision of national solidarity. My artist friends who attended the festival in 2011 gradually stopped going, as the model of national unity in Tahrir Square gave way to divisive politics and the violent suppression of protests. Some

claimed that “the artistic level was basic,” or that the festival was too hot and crowded. These gestures of refusal told me that the festival’s celebration of popular art and national solidarity no longer felt revolutionary to them amid contentious new politics. Now that elections had brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power, to the disappointment of secularist intellectuals, the celebration of popular culture felt outmoded. The fugitive intellectuals went back to their work in underground music, theater, or art, and the Independent Culture Coalition stopped meeting.

Using popular festivity to re-create a utopian community proved to have particular limitations after the violent suppression of popular nationwide protests. In this historical context, artists grew less optimistic about using the urban square as a microcosm of national revolutionary community. They could claim little room for political critique here, aside from a table for handing out pamphlets and stickers from the No Military Trials for Civilians movement. The nostalgic scenarios of popular festivity in the square were decreasingly able to speak back to the politics of the present, in Muñoz’s understanding of utopian critique. Neither was there space at the festival for the kinds of debate that would have attracted a fugitive community of intellectuals who refused the military discourse on postrevolution citizenship. The fate of Art Is an Open Square symbolized the impasse of revolutionary intellectuals who used art to preserve the memory of a cherished utopian community, even as they recognized the need to move their utopian imagination forward. It was a dilemma that they began to address through new experiments with space.

The festive square was a container of valued diversity, a plural and popular public along the lines of the *mulid* where everyone was welcome. However, its spatial scenario offered a limited narrative of progress: that of entering the festive square, enjoying its mixed offerings, and leaving uplifted. It was a one-directional movement into a fixed utopia. Artists and intellectuals who grew disappointed with the co-optation of popular festivity by Egyptian regimes that organized their own “demonstrations” imagined moving out of the square to seek new utopian scenarios. These scenarios of community entailed reimagining avant-gardists’ organizational and performance practices. Instead of curating popular arts for the festival, the artists now worked to incorporate popular styles into their own repertoires. They recognized the need to open the space of popular performance by taking their own bodies and practices before new audiences. In theoretical terms, the fugitive performers began to open up their concrete scenarios of utopian community both spatially and temporally.

Pop-up street shows became the signature of the next wave of this revolutionary performance project. Taking chamber music and ballet to neighborhoods, and feminist skits to Metro trains, the artist collectives Mini Mobile Concerts in Alexandria and Mahatat for Contemporary Art in Cairo adapted elite performance genres for imagined popular publics. When the performers entered

public spaces, they carried the cultural authority of a middle- (or upper-) class background. Yet they relied on audiences to reciprocate their gestures of outreach. The collaborative scenarios that resulted were less curated than the representation of national diversity at the arts festival. They were risky experiments, and they sometimes failed, as I noticed in videos of several pop-up shows on the Facebook pages of the arts collectives I followed. My extended case study of a single troupe, and its evolving clown show, investigates the dynamic unfolding of the scenario of performer-audience interaction. It also shows how moving the performance from a theatrical to a quotidian context opened new means of staging community through gestures of recognition.

Reimagining Community Theater in the Work of Red Tomato

In the summer of 2014, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was inaugurated as Egypt's new president, and Tahrir Square's grassy island was roped off and adorned with a military-style "commemorative monument." Political murals had been painted over in the vicinity. Even stalwart activists were persuaded by the military's claim that it had corrected the path of revolution by deposing the Islamist government. However, there were rumblings of discontent in the theater community. Several editions of *Art Is an Open Square* had been canceled by security forces, and state theaters had gone without a budget for three years. As formal cultural and political activity ground to a near halt, performers were left with the option of guerrilla strategies for finding performance space. Pop-up shows offered pragmatic means of evading the security permit system and the new law against public gathering, as well as allowing adventurous performers to reach out to popular audiences. Their gestures of outreach created spaces in which encounter across class lines was possible. With the decline of revolutionary institutions, such as the Independent Culture Coalition, these fugitive intellectuals found themselves staging revolutionary ideals through simpler performance practices.

The Cairo-based troupe *Outa Hamra* (Red Tomato) had long espoused eclectic notions of a performance community, working with refugees, juvenile prisoners, and sex workers. The troupe members were themselves a mixed group, including four Egyptians and two European residents of Cairo. Their commissioned work with marginalized populations came under the rubric of what an English-speaking member described as "community theater." However, troupe members generally called their style *al-masrah al-igtima'i* (social theater), since they made a point of taking shows outside designated community centers and offering them as free public entertainment. Red Tomato had started out as a street troupe that performed for children, and it had a lively, festive style. The troupe's embrace of clowning since 2010 was part of its long history of experimenting with performance styles, from puppetry to

playback theater. Its strategy of performing both in community centers and on Egyptian streets turned the work into social theater, using scenarios of inclusion in the former to stage visions of open community at large. Political theorists have cited refugee rights as a model for human rights, describing these as “the paradoxical rights of the private, poor, unpoliticized individual.”²¹ Red Tomato staged a concrete link between these two sets of rights by taking its clown shows to both refugee and urban venues, folding both sets of audiences into the scenario of utopian community.

Syrians were coming to Egypt in large numbers in 2014 as the civil war at home entered a particularly violent phase. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) resettled many Syrian families in Alexandria, where it found them housing with relative ease. Yet the Syrians struggled with local hostility and xenophobia. As part of an initiative to make them feel more at home, the UNHCR commissioned Red Tomato to produce a show in collaboration with French members of the European organization *Payasos Sin Fronteras* (PSF; Clowns without Borders). PSF had been founded by Spanish performer Tortell Poltrona, who argued that clowning “offer[ed] humor as a means of psychological support to communities that have suffered trauma.”²² Red Tomato’s members had studied clowning with French trainers from PSF in 2010 and found that it fit well with other theater methods for staging the integration of newcomers into communities. The troupe’s best-known play, *Going to the Neighbors’ House*, was a comic scenario developed out of workshops for Sudanese and Eritrean residents of Cairo and their Egyptian neighbors, on commission from the Psycho-social Institute. The clown show extended the comic genre of neighborly misunderstanding into a broader, less verbal scenario of outsider status. Since Red Tomato wove Egyptian folk comedy styles into the show, it fashioned locally recognizable versions of the clown in a genre that could stage an Egyptian welcome to Syrians.

When I interviewed Red Tomato members after a rehearsal, they had different takes on how clowning worked in Egypt. “It’s a powerful way of talking about things, because it makes people lower their defenses,” argued Jakob, a founding troupe member and longtime European resident of Cairo. Noha Khattab, an Egyptian anthropologist who joined the troupe after writing a master’s thesis about it, liked clowning because it recognized common humanity across social backgrounds. “If you are a refugee or living in a slum, it collapses the idea that you can’t laugh or have fun.” Troupe members saw clowning as an extension of their community theater work, as it offered another framework for reaching across social divides. Aly, who had come to Red Tomato from his political street theater troupe Hala, found that street theater often drew suspicion from authorities. “Before January 25, we got some pushback from security forces,” he said. “They saw us working with foreigners and street children, so they sometimes summoned us to the police station after a show. But when they saw our work, they didn’t have any problems with it.” I found this

remarkable after seeing a video of an early show on the troupe's Facebook page in which Aly put on a police officer's hat and caricatured his arrogance. Jakob then described a performance in a poor Cairo suburb where the troupe had encountered hostile neighborhood men, one of whom threatened to break the tiles of their temporary stage. But when the same man and his friends saw the show, they did indeed lower their defenses, laugh, and congratulate the troupe at the end. Red Tomato's movements in urban space were clearly eased by a performance genre seen as folksy and fun rather than political or educational.

Their 2014 clown show *1, 2 . . . 5!* consequently took up the assignment for Syrian refugees as both a light-hearted entertainment and a meditation on the role of outsiders in a community. The PSF's abstractly utopian idea of clowning as a means of welcoming displaced people became more concrete in Red Tomato's interpretation, which grew out of its history of working with marginalized groups and absorbing details of their lives. The troupe often wove social narratives (such as a theme of child abuse) into clown shows, unlike their French collaborators in the 2014 project. They resolved their artistic differences by making a show that relied more heavily on nonverbal gesture than usual, yet included locally specific details. The figure of the clown in this show acted as an outsider in various scenarios, eliciting different kinds of recognition from Syrian audiences in a community center and Egyptians in a neighborhood street.

Scenes and Gestures of Hospitality

On a Saturday in June 2014, Red Tomato members and their four French collaborators traveled to Alexandria for the first of two scheduled shows in town. UNHCR had booked the garden of the Arab Medical Union villa for what the printed banner called a "Day of Entertainment for Syrian Children with the Cooperation of Clowns Without Borders." This consisted of a lunch followed by a clown show for about forty children and an equal number of adults. Young Egyptian men in UNHCR jackets chaperoned the Syrian children on old swings and play equipment while well-dressed parents chatted or checked their phones to one side. Holding an event to welcome refugees was not enough, however, to evoke gestures of goodwill from individual Egyptians. As I wove through the crowd, I saw UNHCR employees chiding young children, one asking a child to repeat, "Long live Egypt." The entertainment section of the day generated a warmer atmosphere, with more formal scenarios for welcoming the outsiders. Actor Shakir from Red Tomato, who emceed the event, greeted the mostly Syrian audience with a funny, high-pitched spiel. He told some jokes and invited children to come forward and tell their own. Both Egyptian and Syrian children in the audience responded, standing on plastic chairs to address the crowd. The scenario of hospitality in this folksy introduction succeeded in eliciting a response from the audience of outsiders.

Then the clowns filed in, dancing to their own music. Dressed in colorful variations on street clothes, with outlandish headgear and small horns to pipe out tunes, they lined up before the audience to stage a scene of arrival in a new place. They placed colorful plastic buckets over their faces, removed these slowly, and stared in comical amazement at their surroundings. The ritual of entry was more formal than usual for Red Tomato, since the clowns came down from the upper balcony of the villa. Yet they worked to invert the authority this implied through rambunctious scenes of conflict. Egyptian and French clowns tussled and held each other in neck grips, and an Egyptian clown sang a phrase by Umm Kulthum to a French clown who ventriloquized a puppet with a line from Edith Piaf. The comic conflict scenarios then gave way to a celebration of outsider status across national lines. Four clowns did headstands while cycling their legs in the air, and one took a watering can to their rears. A female clown hung upside-down from a pole carried horizontally by two men, her silver leotard covering what would have otherwise been an improper exposure of skin. The show-stopping scene was one in which all the clowns took each other's red fezzes—symbols of stately decorum from an earlier Arab era—and placed them on each other's heads down a line, in a lively image of irreverence for social status. The scenes of slapstick invited the audience to laugh together at the absurdity of one-upmanship and status.

While the children clapped enthusiastically, I noticed that the Syrian adults were restrained in response to this utopian scenario of a society without rules. Several of the mothers were dressed in modest, all-black clothing, and all sat silently, occasionally filming the show on their smartphones. Well-dressed fathers were similarly composed and proper. One man asked his child to give up his seat for me, a hospitable gesture that I refused with thanks. The parents' gentle directions to children to sit down or be polite affirmed their adherence to middle-class norms of respectability despite their current displacement. They resisted playing the part of dispossessed refugees. In this respect, it was telling that the adults seated near me declined to sing along to a popular Lebanese song about exile, "Nassam 'Alayna al-Hawa'" ("Breathe on Us, O Breeze") when the clowns asked them to. Its romantic voicing of exile status, like the clowns' performance of an exuberant welcome, contrasted with the desultory hospitality of UNHCR workers (and reportedly of Alexandrians more generally). Red Tomato's honoring of outsider status worked less well within a social scenario of grudging acceptance of refugees. The day of entertainment was an exceptional event in this context, an abstractly utopian scene of welcome. Syrian children reciprocated the clowns' gestures of outreach, but their parents reciprocated the UNHCR workers' silence. The clowns' performance of a scenario of what Noha called "melting status" as a means to stage an honest welcome was more fully realized outside the refugee office's formal event.

The frenetic half-hour clown show ended with polite applause, and the Syrians did not linger. The performers took off their noses, put their props



Red Tomato and PSF perform at a day of entertainment for Syrian refugees, Alexandria, June 2014. Photograph by Sonali Pahwa.

in a bag, and returned to the van. A scheduled second show, at a UNHCR facility in an Alexandria suburb, had been canceled by Egyptian security, but they wanted to perform again. Red Tomato's clowns had done a version of *1, 2 . . . 5!* at a Youth and Sports (Al-Shabab w al-Riyada) community center in Cairo, and they knew the show worked well for an Egyptian audience. So they conferred with a local friend and decided to try performing in a downtown Alexandria neighborhood. The street show was their favorite genre, since it was free of physical boundaries between performers and members of the community. In this Alexandria show, the narrative of outsiders arriving in a new place took on a new meaning in the context of a neighborhood where the clowns depended on hospitality to find their performance space. They lowered their status spatially and bodily when they ventured into the city street.

The clowns sat at a sidewalk café in the downtown Alexandria neighborhood Kum al-Dikka, situated where a busy street branched into a quieter residential one. They put on their headgear and colorful accessories when they finished their tea, and gradually began performing. Two French clowns started juggling pins, getting the attention of neighborhood boys who asked for a lesson. The café owner's young son (who studied at a French school) came up to ask where the foreigners were from, and when he realized they

shared a language, he took one of the clowns for a hospitable walk around the block. Another clown played a tune on his flute and drew the attention of men sitting before an outdoor television, set up for the World Cup match that was about to start. Women walking home stopped to scrutinize the mixed-gender group at the café, where women did not usually sit. In their different ways, the children and adults in the neighborhood recognized the presence of strangers in their midst and engaged with them tentatively. The interaction was unmediated by a formal welcome, such as that of the banner at the Arab Medical Union. Its opening up of the performance space was a more improvised and dialogical process.

When all the performers had warmed up, the ritual of entering the neighborhood began. This time, the musicians had a longer path through the narrow street, echoing the musical procession (*zaffa*) with which a marriage was announced in urban areas. Stavros, a local actor and friend of the troupe, brought along his drum to increase the volume so it could reach apartments in the taller buildings. By the time the party of oddly dressed performers had danced through the neighborhood's main artery, several heads had popped out of windows and determined that this was not a bridal welcome. Some adults and several children followed the clowns to the empty parking lot, tucked between buildings, where they would do their show. As I watched Shakir set up the tarpaulin seating and stage tiles, I noticed some women looking out of apartment windows above. They stayed there through the show, angling their phones to capture images. Audiences watched the show unfold from different vantage points, depending on whether they were children, adult men, or women. Likewise, my sense of their responses was guided by my position at the front of the lot. I heard claps and laughs from the windows and saw more detailed responses from children (and some adults) at closer range.

As the clowns launched into the same sequence of upside-down antics as before, I heard laughter from all corners. One scene that had fallen relatively flat in the previous show was loudly applauded here: that of a Punch and Judy-style fight between Noha, playing the hunchbacked "great-grandmother," and Hani, as her son "the grandfather." They battled with sticks in an indecorous inversion of patriarchal authority. When things got particularly boisterous, one of the French clowns hid in a barrel to escape, and Noha beat him out of it with a stick. The reversal of gender and age hierarchies received wild applause. Such cartoonish violence between the visibly Egyptian characters in the show, dressed in folksy outfits, resonated most audibly with this neighborhood audience. The clowns were a welcome style of outsider for them, colorful as a puppet show but engaging as humans. The neighborhood children went up to the performers at the end and shook their hands, asking to take photographs with Hani and Noha. I interpreted the applause and the conversation between performers and children as gestures affirming their shared laughter at authoritative elders. As parents stood to one side



Fight between Grandfather and Great-Grandmother, Red Tomato performance in a Kum al-Dikka parking lot. Photograph by Sonali Pahwa.

or watched from windows, these gestures created “intimate communication while under public gaze.”²³ The clowns had staged a scene of upending social hierarchy in a comical style directed at children, but that the adults were also glad to welcome. In their inverted role as rambunctious clowns, the high-status European and Cairo outsiders performed an alliance with low-status children and staged a utopian version of subaltern community.

The show ended on a triumphant note, but the clowns had to move on quickly. I accompanied them back down the lane to the main street, where a man asked if they were “the Syrian troupe.” He had identified the foreign-looking performers with the show for or by Syrians, of which word had spread. It was only a moment, but it showed that the line between stigmatized refugees and high-status outsiders was temporarily blurred. It was difficult to tell what kind of outsider the performer represented in a street encounter. Yet the clowns interpreted the success of their pop-up show as a sign that outsider performers were welcome in Alexandria neighborhoods, contrary to the security forces’ contention that their presence would cause conflict. As the Red Tomato clowns chatted over the fish dinner to which they treated their French guests, they spoke about the second show as the main success. “I felt excited to be in the street as myself, not just as a performer,” Noha said. “We did not have to trick the audience that we’re people from outer space who drop in, do the show, and leave.” Her social position as an upper-class Cairo woman did not make her an alien here, nor did her clown outfit. She thought

the neighbors' hospitable welcome of the performers staged a kind of recognition across class (and cultural) lines.

The exaggerated physicality of clowning made visible the potential of non-verbal and gestural communication in staging alternative scenarios of social relation. After the ritual of welcome, mediated through the *zaffa* procession, the neighborhood residents engaged warmly if minimally with the clowns. The children were the most communicative, their gestures of recognition not yet disciplined by gender and age roles. Their interactions with the outsiders staged an open-ended scenario of community, unusual in times of internal social division and xenophobia. This pointed to the value of street performance in activating neighborly hospitality. Its layering of playful interactions onto urban space extended the clownish utopia into more quotidian social scenarios. It thus translated UNHCR's mission of providing support to refugees in multiple ways, addressing both Syrians in Egypt and Egyptians deprived of community-building rituals by the police state. The concrete utopia that the performance conjured up was able to cross assigned social divides and hierarchies in part because its vision of community was founded on welcoming outsiders. Its broad gestures and elision of language aligned with an idea on which Red Tomato's members all agreed: that clowning should not have a message because "nobody wants advice from a clown." The social message was thus inherent in the physical presence of the performance.

In a clown show built on physical humor, rules of public behavior were up for change. The inversion potential of clowning scenarios, which Jakob called "breaking defenses" and Noha "melting status," was particularly effective at the level of the neighborhood. Here, audiences activated repertoires of hospitality with which to welcome outsiders, as well as a tradition of permitting street performers (such as puppeteers) who enacted status inversion. The politically radical clown troupe could thus fashion scenarios of utopian welcome into a community more concretely here than at the UNHCR event, with its mission of integrating refugees in the abstract and minimizing cultural differences through humor. The gestures of hospitality with which residents of Kum al-Dikka welcomed the clowns exemplified a grassroots process of building temporary alliances across differences. They showed the utopian possibilities inherent in quotidian cultural repertoires. Children's taste for status inversions made them particular allies of the clowns, and their gestures of recognition briefly conveyed the hope of making communities more expansive and inclusive.

Popular Performance, Utopian Community, and the Future of Revolutionary Hope

From 2012 to 2014, when Egyptian police enforced antiprotest laws and curfews, public performances interrupted the attempts of successive regimes to

securitize the streets and stabilize politics. Both *Art Is an Open Square* and the clown show *1, 2 . . . 5!* resisted being categorized as commemorations of the revolution. Instead, they drew street audiences into heightened affective repertoires, echoing the performance techniques by which revolutionary protests had offered alternative ways of interacting in public space. The architecture of interaction in such shows was formed by embodied practices more than rules of policed public space. Decontextualizing gestures from everyday scenarios (of hospitality, for instance) turned the cultural values embedded in the gestures into open-ended interactive practices. The performers' reworking of popular public repertoires through decontextualization and transposition produced stagings of community that extracted the utopian from the everyday. These unspectacular interventions escaped the kinds of media attention that large protests attracted. Instead, they circulated through videos on social media, and in the memories of those who viewed and participated in performances.

As revolutionaries undertook the labor of structural change, social theater experiments illuminated the movement of revolutionary practice from its spectacular to its quotidian phase. Political scenarios on a national scale were replaced by smaller gestures of community building that folded into everyday life and social repertoires. Returning to Muñoz's concepts of everyday utopia, we can see street performances of inclusive community as representative sites of utopian imagination. When read through the lens of gestural exchange, they offer analytical purchase for understanding how revolutionary thought translated into embodied social dialogues. In particular, Rodríguez's use of gesture to conceptualize recognition as a performative rather than juridical concept informs my reading of how post-2011 performances communicated revolutionary desires for relationality and mutual recognition. Their everyday scale echoed Harney and Moten's idealized concept of revolution as being without politics, or specific political goals.²⁴ It is worth considering such initiatives as subaltern modes of revolutionary practice that built channels of communication between intellectuals and a broader public.

Cultural and political avant-gardes intersected spectacularly during Egypt's 2011 uprising and occasionally sustained each other in the years that followed. As the independent theater movement detached concepts of modern culture from progressive visions of the future, it opened the way for expanding concepts of avant-garde performance "from temporal to more spatial notions of cutting edge as border."²⁵ The spaces of interaction between these artists and their publics grew broader after the intellectual undercommons joined in revolutionary protests. The utopian connections that occasionally formed in street performance now made visible the intellectual idealism that persisted in the fugitive underground of the nation through its years of political struggle. The venues into which theater makers inserted their visions of idealized community—the urban festival, refugee event, and neighborhood street show—offered their own cultural repertoires to the utopian project. Unexpectedly, the urban neighborhood of Kum al-Dikka proved particularly

able to open its concept of community in plural, inclusive ways. It showed that repertoires of pluralism in a space did not necessarily match its normative cultural boundaries. The hospitable residents of Kum al-Dikka might be less cosmopolitan than the Cairenes who came to Art Is an Open Square, but their neighborliness offered paths of entry for outsiders. Gestures of recognition for the work of avant-garde performers here offered glimpses of hope for the continuing exchange of critical thought through theater.

In the repressive period of Egyptian politics cemented by the 2013 coup, it became apparent that the political revolution was not moving forward. There was no time beyond military rule on the horizon. Yet there were ways in which revolutionary ideas spread geographically. Theater makers and musicians were among the vectors of this revolutionary movement, as subaltern intellectuals accustomed to making space for their ideas outside formal institutions. Their fugitive techniques allowed them to sidestep police crackdowns and reach out to audiences with improvised scenarios of inclusive community. Using quotidian cultural repertoires in their shows, the performers demonstrated that everyday practices could sustain the ideals of the revolution. And as they engaged with a broader array of citizens, their performance repertoires grew more popular, their definitions of theater diverse, and their utopian imagination more open.

The relative absence of minority identity politics in their postuprising theater signaled a provisional embrace of nationalist repertoires of citizenship. Performers of all stripes were inspired by revolutionary sentiment to reconcile avant-garde and popular art forms, and theater makers likewise experimented with reaching across cultural registers. They were on unfamiliar ground here, and their attempts to expand repertoires with clowning, dance, and popular performance genres often failed to win support across their traditional and intended new audiences. As a relatively successful effort, the clown show *1, 2 . . . 5!* provided a model for using performance scenarios flexibly to address different audiences. A heightened use of gesture that invited dialogic response, completing the scenario of community, allowed a broader range of people to inhabit the role of theater audience. Moreover, the hierarchy between pedagogue-performer and student-audience typically inscribed into theater for social change was flattened in this scenario. When the clown show moved from a context of pedagogical theater to one of street theater, it gestured at inverting the performer-audience relationship altogether. The performers were cultural outsiders, asking neighborhood audiences to welcome those unlike themselves. The radicalism of this gesture lay in aligning more and less privileged outsiders and staging the possibility of their alliance in a “fellowship of the flawed.”²⁶

Avant-garde street performances rehearsed a community to come, in both futurist and contemporary terms, negating the official position that the revolution was past. Its concrete reimagination of public space to enact alternative social relations resembled techniques of protest performance,²⁷ as well as the festivity of apolitical street entertainment.²⁸ The symbolic repertoires of the

performances were key to staging their visions of community. When they incorporated subaltern gestures, such as that of the weak beating the strong in the clown show, or the chants of soccer ultras at the arts festival, they revived memories of revolutionary inversion. The mix of performance repertoires at street shows in Cairo and Alexandria opened up different lines of social engagement and scenarios of what a future community should look like. The utopian memory of citizens acting in common during the 2011 uprising thus extended into more modest gestures of reimagining “the people” as an avant-garde assemblage.

As the political revolution slowed with the tapering of mass protests after 2011, media commentators followed military leaders in calling for a return to normalcy.²⁹ The artists and activists who wanted to keep alive revolutionary hopes thus returned to fugitive practices to enact what Asef Bayat called *nonmovements* for social change. In this context, some everyday uses of public space grew charged with potential political significance. Performers turned their interventions here into memorable and repeatable gestures, and their repertoires modeled the double-edged possibilities of physical movement. Even in entertaining repertoires, such as clowning, they extended their scope of rights to the city and public sociality. The new society, in their utopian vision, expanded repertoires of revolutionary citizenship beyond the world of intellectuals and political elites.

To what extent could such playful interventions challenge the rollback of rights under a new dictatorship? I contemplate this question via Margaret Litvin’s suggestion that art is revolutionary when “most agile and most frequently revised, best able to respond to the protean and unpredictable machinations of counterrevolutionary actors.”³⁰ Street performance was a means of reaffirming the political agency of the performing body as something more than a sign to be inscribed and co-opted within media narratives. It adapted with agility to shifts in political scenarios and enabled activists to modulate their response to counterrevolutionary pressures. Most crucially, revolutionary art held a space for utopian thought outside the apparent closure of revolutionary politics. Theatrical experiments with new communal relations echoed Muñoz’s philosophical concept of the utopian gesture as “not a full-fledged resistance, but . . . a moment when that overwhelming frame of a here and now, a spatial and temporal order that is calibrated against one, is resisted.”³¹ In scaling revolutionary hope down to the performing body that invited others into its story, dramatists affirmed their faith in art as a reservoir of dissident feeling. It could push against the grain of populist utopianism or political despair. And it preserved the idea of the citizen as an actor demanding to be heard.

Conclusion



Revolutionizing Cultural Citizenship

One summer afternoon in 2014, I took a Cairo Metro train to the very end of the line to meet a theater troupe led by Nada Sabet, a thirty-year-old director with degrees from the American University in Cairo and Goldsmiths, University of London. She had returned to Egypt after the revolution, like many expatriate elites, to participate in the nation's cultural reconstruction. Nada's small silver car, into which I squeezed with three actors and another researcher, was heading even farther out of the familiar city center. It rattled over the bumpy, unmarked roads to a women's cooperative in one of Cairo's "informal neighborhoods" (*'ashwa'iyyat*), where her independent troupe was to perform a skit show about female circumcision. Actors Ahmed, Sami, and Shirin, middle-class twentysomethings from Cairo and Alexandria, would not have been found performing in such a neighborhood before the revolution. A troupe like Nada's could not, indeed, have traveled to make theater for social change before state security rules eased with the fall of Hosni Mubarak. Nada applied to produce a show for one of the new internationally funded projects that emerged with the renewed global attention on Egypt, and took on an anti-circumcision assignment from the United Nations-funded nongovernmental organization Y-Peer.¹ She would use her characteristically comic style to invite discussion about the social and sexual ethics of modern womanhood here.

The building where the women's cooperative met was a state-owned community center, incongruously immaculate amid the street's piles of uncollected garbage. The actors unloaded lengths of colorful fabric from the van to wrap into impromptu costumes, together with wigs, accessories, and a banner printed with the troupe's name, Noon Creative Enterprise (Noon li-l-Ibda'). Upstairs, an audience of about twenty women welcomed them with smiles despite their delay, pleased to have a show rather than the usual dull lecture at their monthly meeting. Nada introduced her sketch comedy, *Hara TV: Keep It Real*, as a set of rehearsals for a fictional television show about women's issues. There would be a discussion afterward where the audience could share their views about what they had seen. Nada's animated hand gestures, T-shirt, and natural hair contrasted with the decorous demeanor of women with stylishly modest clothes in the audience, promising a lively debate about gender roles.

The performance was designed to bridge their visible cultural divide through its innovative genre, which hybridized Egyptian neofolk styles with techniques of legislative and forum theater taken from the transnational Theater of the Oppressed.² Its wide-ranging satire of calls for female circumcision in Egypt aimed to show that women's oppression crossed class and regional lines.

The performance was fast-paced and folksy. Actor Ahmed dressed in drag as a conservative mother-in-law who prayed her new grandchild would be a boy. And a modern city doctor, performed by Shirin in a lab coat, also endorsed the idea that circumcision was necessary to moderate women's sexuality. With their slapstick style, the Noon actors generated a surprisingly funny performance about a banned surgical procedure that remained common throughout Egypt and resulted in deaths at unregulated clinics. The audience laughed and nodded, apparently relating to the troupe's framing of circumcision as a symptom of patriarchal hypocrisy about gender equality in Egypt. Though two unsmiling older women left midway, visibly displeased, the audience otherwise warmly received the satirical critique. After the show, however, the discussion revealed a gap between the affective alignment of performers and audience and their different views on the pragmatics of social change. One woman in the audience sighed, "I wish I could be like those women [in the skits]." She felt bound by gender norms herself, even if she laughed at how they were represented in the show. "I have a boy and girl, and treat them the same at home," another woman declared proudly. "Treating them the same will not change society," her skeptical friend responded.

The Noon troupe's project of taking socially critical performance to audiences in urban slums, and then small towns, produced an ambivalent space of encounter between idealistic young avant-gardists and audiences more resigned to the lack of change in their social world. In the utopian moment of performance, they found common ground in thinking about the future of their society. Yet the theatrical space could only serve for so long as the metonym for a revolutionary nation in which all citizens identified with the spectacle of political democracy and committed to fulfilling its promise. While the educational television genre on which *Hara TV* was modeled addressed women in need of enlightenment, urging them to catch up with progressive gender norms, the discussion showed that democracy was a more laborious process. Audiences pushed back against the avant-gardist performers' vision of changing gender roles, reminding them that the world outside the theater moved more slowly. Their bodies were not flexible entities but rather bound to families and judged by the norms of communities. It took a brave woman to fight against the idea of girls' sexual purity by refusing circumcision when real husbands and mothers-in-law were so more powerful than comic characters. Still, Noon's theater makers continued to travel with their show and urge critical debate through performance. Spreading their hopeful vision of the future through cultural outreach was among the last avenues open to activist youth in an era of counterrevolution.

The utopian spirit that galvanized many artists and dramatists in 2011 had fizzled rapidly at state cultural institutions. Battles between Islamist and liberal leaders waged on media channels made it clear that the debates over the dominant culture of the nation would not be resolved easily. The liberals used arts institutions as a platform for their ideology. At a meeting on cultural policy at the Cairo Opera House in June 2012, on the eve of the presidential election, the moderator invited attending artists and intellectuals to discuss how, in the new Islamist regime, “extremist voices attacked creative freedom and the right to knowledge.” Independent dramatists at the meeting voiced agreement with state cultural officials in a closing of the ranks of political liberals against the perceived threat. Theater professor Nehad Selaiha joked with colleagues that the Muslim Brotherhood would form a caliphate and relocate Egypt’s capital to Jerusalem. Liberal jurist Hossam Eissa, the keynote speaker, reminded the audience of the notable contributions of Christians and Jews to Egyptian music and cinema. Art had become a battleground rather than a meeting point for conceptions of citizenship in these halls of power. Secularist bureaucrats and artists, in particular, feared losing the privilege they had enjoyed in state institutions. Their fears became concrete when the Muslim Brotherhood’s minister of culture, Alaa Abdel Aziz, fired the head of the Cairo Opera House in June 2013, reportedly saying that the state should not support Western arts for a small elite.³

The decision catalyzed protests in Cairo and Alexandria, which joined the national activist wave culminating in the army coup of July. Even performance became a political tool, as Islamists, liberals, and military supporters each used the familiar repertoires of urban protest, including chanting, singing, and dancing, to create camera-ready scenes of occupied squares for television and social media. The political spectacles by which leaders claimed stewardship over the popular revolution were so pervasive as to marginalize the demands of performers themselves. At the weeks-long protest in front of Cairo’s Ministry of Culture headquarters, members of the opera ballet danced in street clothes, performing the role of outcast artists. Meanwhile, independent dramatists felt ignored when they asked about democratizing the ministry’s structure and budget.⁴ In the parallel protest at Alexandria’s Bayram El Tounsi Theater, led by independent musicians and dramatists, participants stated more boldly that their demand was cultural freedom. Avant-garde performers, including the Noon troupe, continued working all this time to organize public arts festivals and cultural outreach initiatives. Their performances offered small-scale models for how artists and intellectuals might bridge growing ideological divides in the nation.

Postrevolution arts initiatives expanded their work well beyond cultural institutions, focusing on public performances and workshops rather than traditional avant-garde audiences. The Mahatat collective for art and performance, for instance, announced on its Facebook page that it was working “to transform public spaces, create opportunities for exposure to the arts, and offer

needs-based learning experiences to artists, practitioners, and entrepreneurs.”⁵ Such collectives continued to voice faith in public arts as a means of fostering community. Theater director Ahmed el-Attar launched the full-scale Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival in 2012 in an effort to bring free access to performance in urban streets and alleys. He wrote of his hopes for the festival in its 2013 program: “On 25 January 2011 we began the first day of our lives both as individuals and as a nation. On that day a glimpse of hope was born, a new future was perceived, and a different reality materialized.”⁶ Expanding the spatial scope of their avant-garde vision was key to dramatists’ efforts to sustain the revolutionary spirit. They recognized that cultural outreach was slow work and would take far longer than the eighteen-day uprising that unseated Mubarak. But they were not content to hand responsibility for cultural democracy back to a Ministry of Culture that had put its support behind the Sisi regime. So they continued to attempt to perform in modest, popular neighborhoods and grapple with the resistances they encountered here. The hard work of outreach brought their utopian ideals down to earth.

Avant-garde performance initiatives staged hopeful cross-class relations after the revolution, circumventing hardening divides in national politics. Their ideals echoed Jacques Rancière’s utopian notion of how theater generates “community as a way of occupying a place and a time, as the body in action as opposed to a mere apparatus of laws; a set of perceptions, gestures and attitudes that precede and pre-form laws and political institutions.”⁷ While dreams of building embodied connections across class difference drove new projects for street and social theater, dramatists recognized that performance often just oriented groups toward each another and staged mutual recognition in a temporary form. Yet they considered the gesture of inviting cultural outsiders into the sphere of avant-garde performance revolutionary in its modest way. It established a new conceptual framework of recognition, in Frank Wilderson’s terms, “predicated not on the subject-effect of cultural performance but on the structure of political ontology, a framework that allows us to substitute a culture of politics for a politics of culture.”⁸ In other words, it democratized art as a site of discussions of citizenship only among a privileged class of aesthetes. Social theater that mapped onto new spaces extended the link between cultural and political citizenship to a more plural community.

Independent cultural producers who successfully launched such popular avant-garde projects offered an implicit solution to the cultural polarization that paralyzed state institutions. The looser aesthetic hierarchy of their own performance tradition enabled them to think of cultural citizenship in more inclusive terms. Between the cultural democracy reforms of the 1990s and the political revolution of 2011, the demos in democracy was variously represented by the activists and the performance genres of independent theater. Where an older generation of state-affiliated dramatists thus spoke of “the people” as a mass to be enlightened, the independents working at the end of the wave made theater for a people to come. Across generations, these



Hip-hop performance at the Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival, 2012.
Photograph by Sonali Pahwa.

dramatists were highly educated, culturally respected, and economically marginal, occupying a position of privileged subalternity that made them effective mediators between neoliberal narratives of high-speed globalization and the slower realities of national historical change. Their own struggles with rigid institutions and hierarchical bureaucracies produced a critical approach to state authority. Within the space of performance, then, subaltern intellectuals and working-class audiences found affective similarities in their critiques of globalization from above and desires for more representative cultural production. Performances for social change embodied these speculatively as cross-class alliances to be activated in times of political need.

The outreach work of Egyptian artists is currently in suspended animation, as the Sisi regime continues to steamroll free expression and critical art with increasing ferocity. Several independent dramatists have stopped making theater. Others are forced to restrict their work to nongovernmental organizations and foreign cultural centers, ending their troupes' history of working across cultural, educational, and corporate institutions. As police crackdowns extend to digital venues, as in the closure of satirist Shadi Abu Zeid's YouTube channel *Al-muhtawa al-ghani* (Rich Content) and his arrest, there remain few underground spaces to which independents can escape and sustain their virtual community. The current regime certainly tests the belief

that art can serve as a forum for expressions of hope for the future. Some independent dramatists with whom I reunited in the counterrevolutionary period looked back cynically at their younger selves, so optimistic about using theater to build a new community. Without cultural spaces in which to enact their visions of engaged citizenship, they went back to office jobs and family lives. Several grew clinically depressed.

None of these friends regretted the 2011 revolution, however. They posted social media memories on each January anniversary and remembered the thrill and hope they had felt during protests. Perhaps it was their expansive knowledge of tragedy that kept them from seeing revolutionaries as tragic figures, like Samuli Schielke's interlocutors of the same Egyptian generation.⁹ In contrast to the grand narratives of social change against which those young Egyptians measured the revolution's failure, the memories my friends drew on were of minor projects and successes. Fashioning visions of community outside a single national narrative was part of their ethic as "soldiers of the cultural battlefield" in the neoliberal age. In this context, the failure of the national uprising was not the end of their story. Their repertoires of hope were enriched by memories of revolutionary protest, as were their embodied practices of citizenship. The dramatists of the independent theater movement were well versed in living across oppressive urban and democratic cultural spaces. When the latter diminished under political pressure, they remembered how such spaces had been rebuilt in the past.

Independent campaigns for cultural outreach had all the uncertainty of street theater, in which the audience welcomed into a democratic scenario might refuse its gestures of inclusion. The conditional optimism of these initiatives differed from the grand narratives of official avant-gardes that claimed to bring a new world into being. The free theater manifesto of 1990, for instance, was far more pragmatic than the celebratory manifesto of the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre. Independent troupes were known for staging their own modest scenarios of self-representation rather than awaiting the arrival of cultural democracy. My analysis of performances through which they did so demonstrates the possibilities of avant-gardist culture in autocratic contexts. It points also to the excess of hope that continues to fuel such work against the political odds. Tracing utopian thinking through cultural activism offers a narrative of revolution that is more historically complex than one centered on the events of 2011. Theater was no longer a magisterial school for modern citizenship in the late Mubarak era. It had become an alternative to the censored, policed publics otherwise available to urban Egyptians. Young avant-gardists embraced it as a lifeworld in which to counter the alienating individualism of a neoliberal economy, as well as the erasure of citizen participation in a dictatorship. As the endurance of Egyptian theater in unlikely circumstances has shown, it was a space worth fighting for. Where such modest spaces of utopian thinking remained, history could still be imagined otherwise.

NOTES

Chapter 1

1. Actor-director Mohamed Sobhi and playwright Lenin el-Ramli, both graduates of the Academy of Arts who refused to work in state theaters, teamed up to establish their Actor's Studio in 1980. Their academic credentials and prior experience in theater helped them raise funds for this private company, which produced smash comedy hits such as *Bi-l-'arabi al-fasih (In Plain Arabic)* and *Wighat nazar (Point of View)*, making Sobhi and El-Ramli household names in the eighties. Despite having to pay a third of its ticket proceeds to the state in taxes, the company was profitable. It even launched an actors' training program in 1991, in evident competition with the state-owned Theater Institute, which was the only formal acting school in Cairo. Nehad Selaiha wrote that the duo's production of *Hamlet* and their award for best production at the national drama critics' circle in 1990 each constituted "a figurative slap in the face" to state theater. Nehad Selaiha, "Guarding His Own Light," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, October 13–19, 2005, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2005/764/cu1.htm>.

2. On neoliberal economic reforms in the 1990s and early 2000s, see Leïla Vignal and Eric Denis, "Cairo as Regional/Global Economic Capital?," in *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*, ed. Diane Singerman and Paul Amar (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006); and Timothy Mitchell, "Dreamland: The Neoliberalism of Your Desires," *Middle East Report* 210 (1999): 28–33.

3. The intellectual undercommons that Harney and Moten describe in the United States is an imagined community of underemployed academics, artists, and political dissidents united by a refusal of the standards of value in the institutions that marginalize them. Harney and Moten refer to the fugitive culture of these intellectuals as an alternative and critical framing of enlightenment as a means of self-realization. See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, U.K.: Minor Compositions, 2013), 26.

4. In her ethnography of art in the Mubarak era, Jessica Winegar argues that cultural democracy was an official policy instituted by Minister of Culture Farouk Hosni, for whom the nation would find representation in art. She also extends this idea to consider various ways in which artists took up the promise of democracy to make claims on the state for cultural rights beyond those initially granted by the regime. Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: Politics of Art and Culture in Egypt* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 154.

5. Lila Abu-Lughod's seminal study of Egyptian television melodrama in the 1990s analyzes the civilizational discourse of shows that framed middle- and upper-class Cairo elites as properly cultured while nouveaux riches and southern

Egyptians were not. Lila Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Meanwhile, Samia Mehrez's focus on battles within the cultural establishment in the early 2000s illuminates the failures of the state establishment in upholding its professed values of social equity and secularism, leading to conflicts with independent literati. Samia Mehrez, *Egypt's Culture Wars: Politics and Practice* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010).

6. Walter Armbrust analyzed this beloved satire of education as a celebration of vulgar aesthetics in counterpoint to the high-mindedness of a failed cultural and political regime. Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 166.

7. Muhammad Taymur, *Mu'allafat muhammad taymur, al-juz' al-thani: Hayatuna al-tamthiliyya* (Cairo: Matba'at al-'Itimad, 1922).

8. An excellent history of early Egyptian theater is found in this comprehensive source: P. C. Sadgrove, *The Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century (1799–1882)* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007).

9. In addition to the employment of singers in theater, the circulation of revolutionary and popular music from street demonstrations to the stage is deftly analyzed in Ziad Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation through Popular Culture* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011). I discuss this topic further in chapter 4.

10. Idris and Al-Hakim made similar arguments in each of their seminal manifestoes arguing for the Egyptianization of theater, issued in 1964 and 1967, respectively. Tawfiq al-Hakim, *Qalabuna al-masrahi* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Adab, 1967); Yusuf Idris, *Nahwa masrah 'arabi ma' al-nusus al-kamila li-l-masrahiyat: "Al-farafir," "Al-mahzala al-ardiya," "Al-jins al-thalith," "Al-mukbattatin"* (Cairo: Al-Watan al-'Arabi, 1984).

11. Faruq 'Abd al-Qadir attributes the flourishing of Egyptian theater in the 1960s to exchange programs with the former Soviet Bloc, and its decline to the diminishing of study-abroad programs that President Nasser's Ministry of Education had sponsored. See Faruq 'Abd al-Qadir, *Izdihar wa suqut al-masrah al-masri* (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-Mu'asir, 1979).

12. Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt*, trans. David Tresilian (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008), 9.

13. See Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

14. A bravura reading of Arabic political drama through the Hamlet trope can be found in Margaret Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey: Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghost* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

15. Edward Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria: From the Six-Day War to the Syrian Uprising* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 11.

16. For example, 'Abd al-Raziq Husayn, "Hamlet . . . masrahiyya tabhath 'an mumatthil!," *Akhir Sa'a*, January 7, 2004, 54.

17. Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria*, 46.

18. Only plays staged longer than three nights required clearance, and festival plays were exempt as a result. Plays staged at foreign cultural centers were likewise uncensored.

19. Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 7.

20. Deleuze observes that “free-floating” forms of control are predicated on the absence of spatial enclosure within disciplinary institutions. Subjects therefore modulate their own relationship to the powers that constrain them, in ways they come to find comfortable. See Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (1992): 3–7.

21. Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 33.

22. For example, “Nadwa: Al-masrah wa al-tajrib,” convened at the Supreme Council for Culture, September 1994, transcript published in *Fusul* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1995).

23. Michel Foucault, in his analysis of the biopolitical methods of controlling populations under neoliberal regimes, notes that the shift from institutional discipline to self-discipline rests on new market principles for governance. The polity remains modeled on the economy, as in traditional (or ordo-) liberalism. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, ed. Michael Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

24. Muhammad Shafiq, interview by the author, September 4, 2004.

25. The interwar era saw the rise of a specifically masculine youth culture of modernity associated with middle-class men who wore the *tarbush* (fez) and had the demeanor of Ottoman aristocrats. For social histories of this culture in sports and photography, respectively, see Wilson Chacko Jacob, *Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870–1940* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011); and Lucie Ryzova, “Boys, Girls, and Kodaks: Peer Albums and Middle-Class Personhood in Mid-Twentieth-Century Egypt,” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 8 (2015): 215–55.

26. See Mark Allen Peterson, *Connected in Cairo: Growing Up Cosmopolitan in the Modern Middle East* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

27. Comprehensive Egyptian census figures do not distinguish between age groups within the working population (ages fifteen to sixty-four), but visualized statistics in the 2016 report of the United Nations Population Fund show that a majority of Egyptian citizens were under thirty-five. Magued Osman et al., *Population Situation Analysis: Egypt 2016* (n.p.: Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research and United Nations Population Fund, 2017), 37, <https://egypt.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/PSA%20Final.pdf>.

28. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

29. Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 40.

30. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.

31. This parallels Muñoz’s reading of performances that turn the idea of queerness into “only a stage” into a grounded culture with its own physical stages. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 98–99.

32. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 30.

33. Jessica Winegar, “Civilizing Muslim Youth: Egyptian State Culture Programs and Islamic Television Preachers,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20 (2014): 445–65.

34. Mehrez, *Egypt's Culture Wars*.

35. Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, 25.

36. Ahmed Nawwar, *Ru'ya mustaqbaliyya 2006–07* (Cairo: General Organization of Cultural Palaces, 2007), 13. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Arabic are my own.

37. Mehrez, *Egypt's Culture Wars*, 74–75.

38. Maurizio Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labor,” in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, *Theory Out of Bounds* 7 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 137.

39. In the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben, intellectuality is an “antagonistic power and form-of-life.” The intellectual lifestyle of theater makers can be seen as an alternative to their interpellation as unemployed youth, as well as an intervention into the cultural field that shows the possibility of a new mode of production. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 11.

40. Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 54.

41. Samuli Schielke, *Egypt in the Future Tense: Hope, Frustration, and Ambivalence before and after 2011* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 23.

42. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 32.

43. Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010), 14.

Chapter 2

1. Farouk Hosni, “Muftatahan,” in *Mahrajan al-qahira al-dawli li-l-masrah al-tajribi 1–10 September 1988 al-kitab al-watha'iqi*, ed. Samir Awad (Cairo: Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre, 1989), 1.

2. Saad Ardash, “Al-fikra w al-mashru’,” in Awad, *Mahrajan al-qahira al-dawli*, 13.

3. For example, “Nadwa: Al-masrah wa al-tajrib” [“Seminar: Theater and Experiment”], convened at the Supreme Council for Culture, September 1994, transcript of conference proceedings in *Fusul* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1995): pt. 1, p. 8.

4. Alfred Farag, “Unesco yatahaddath fi al-masrah al-lama'qul,” in Awad, *Mahrajan al-qahira al-dawli*, 28–29.

5. Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 154–55.

6. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 209.

7. Taymur, *Mu'allafat muhammad taymur*, 4–5.

8. Quoted in Alfred Farag, “Saad Wahba, Katiban Masrahiyan,” in *Saad Wahba . . . bayna al-thuna'iyat al-kalimah wa al-fa'l*, ed. Ahmad Sakhsukh (Cairo: Akadimiyyat al-Funuun, 1998), 122.

9. John Conteh-Morgan, “The Other Avant-Garde: The Theater of Radical Aesthetics and the Poetics and Politics of Performance in Contemporary Africa,” in *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*, ed. James M. Harding and John Rouse (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 113.

10. Eminent intellectual Hakim studied law in Paris and went to the theater often, inspiring him to turn to playwriting when he returned to Egypt in the 1930s. At this time, he argued for European-style literary drama in classical

Arabic, writing many such dramas himself, with characters from ancient Greece (such as Hippocrates) and the Arab medieval period (such as Shahrazad). In the 1960s, when the intellectual current turned to calls for popular drama, he wrote a magisterial treatise on “our theatrical mold,” which originated in Egyptian folk culture and should borrow its forms. See Tawfiq al-Hakim, *Plays, Prefaces, and Postscripts of Tawfiq al-Hakim*, vol. 2, trans. William M. Hutchins (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents, 1981).

11. James M. Harding and John Rouse, introduction to Harding and Rouse, *Not the Other Avant-Garde*, 2.

12. Richard Schechner, “The Conservative Avant-Garde,” in “What Is an Avant-Garde?” special issue, *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (Autumn 2010): 895.

13. Christina McMahon, *Recasting Transnationalism through Performance: Theatre Festivals in Cape Verde, Mozambique, and Brazil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 7.

14. Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*.

15. Ziter, *Political Performance in Syria*, 148–49.

16. Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 2.

17. Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, 106.

18. A questionnaire distributed to 340 audience members at the opening edition of CIFET revealed that 63 percent were in their twenties. Most had university degrees or were current students, and a significant proportion of each audience consisted of amateur dramatists who stated that they were attending the festival to expand their knowledge about theater (*al-thaqafa al-masrahyya*). The survey was reported in *Al-Masrah* magazine. Naji Jayyid, “Da’wa li-l-‘ta’arruf ‘ala jumhur al-masrah al-tajribi,” *Al-Masrah*, nos. 7–8 (July–December 1988): 117–22. A sociological survey of CIFET audiences ten years later reported similar results. See Nisrin al-Bughdadi, *Al-masrah al-masri wa jumhuruhu: Al-taqrir al-awwal* (Cairo: Al-Markaz al-Qawmi li-l-Abhath al-Ijtima’iyya wa al-Jina’iyya, 1999).

19. Department of Reports, *Al-Masrah*, “Al-tajrib fi-l-masrah wa mashakil al-mukhrijin al-shabab,” *Al-Masrah*, no. 10 (September 1989): 3.

20. Department of Reports, *Al-Masrah*, 3.

21. Samia Habib, “Nishat huwa’ al-masrah fi misr,” *Al-Masrah*, no. 10 (September 1989): 34.

22. Nehad Selaiha, *Egyptian Theatre: A Diary, 1990–92*, (Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization, 1993), 12.

23. The manifesto was reproduced in the following month’s issue of *Theater* magazine. Unsigned manifesto of the free theater troupes, *Al-Masrah*, no. 23 (October 1990): 37.

24. Notable examples include novelist and playwright Yusuf Idris’s 1964 manifesto *Toward an Arab Theater* [*Nahwa masrah ‘arabi*] and Tawfiq al-Hakim’s *Our Theatrical Mold* [*Qalabuna al-masrah*] in 1967.

25. Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 29.

26. Unsigned manifesto of the free theater troupes, 37.

27. Unsigned manifesto, 37–38.

28. Saleh Saad, “Tajrubat jama’at al-suradiq wa funun al-furjah al-sha’biyah,” *Funun al-furjah al-sh’abiyah* 1 (2002): 122.

29. Saleh Saad, interview by the author, August 11, 2004.

30. Hany El-Metennawy, interview by the author, June 17, 2004.

31. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Khaliq, interview by the author, August 16, 2005.

32. Structural adjustment reforms that had been enacted since the late 1980s shifted the availability of new jobs from the state sector to private corporations that required multilingual skills, leaving large numbers of middle-class Egyptian youth without jobs. See Ragui Assaad, “Unemployment and Youth Insertion in the Labor Market in Egypt,” in *The Egyptian Economy: Current Challenges and Future Prospects*, ed. Hanaa Kheir-el-Din (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008).

33. The Hanager was established as a follow-up to CIFET, “to bring into our domain new elements that have obtained international and local recognition.” See Hoda Wasfi, “Dr Hoda Wasfi mudir masrah al-hanajir: Najah al-la’b fi-l-dimagh arnaki!,” unsigned interview, *Al-Qahira*, May 18, 2004, 13.

34. Hoda Wasfi, interview by the author, June 15, 2002.

35. Zaynab Muntassir, “Fidra ‘al-jumra al-khabitha’: Sayyidat al-asrar am sayyidat al-ashrar?,” *Ruz al-Yusuf*, October 27, 2001, 92–93.

36. Ibrahim al-Husayni, “Al-mafduh fi fidra,” *Al-Masrah*, nos. 103–5 (August–October 2001): 30–31; Amin Bakir, “Fidra rasin wa fidra al-darisin ‘ala masrah al-hanajir,” *Al-Masrah*, nos. 103–5 (August–October 2001): 32–33.

37. Rasha Abdel Moneim, “Fi bu’rat al-hamish,” *Al-Liqa’ al-Thamin li Firq al-Masrah al-Hurr: Al-Nashra al-Yawmiyya*, no. 1 (August 12, 2005).

38. Hazem Shehata, “‘Afwan ustadh luis . . .,” *Al-Liqa’ al-Sabi’ li Firq al-Masrah al-Hurr: Al-Nashra al-Yawmiyya*, no. 7 (August 22, 2004).

39. Quoted in Amani ‘Abd al-Hamid, “Firq al-masrah al-mustaqill tata’arri ‘ala masrah al-tamwil al-hukumi,” *Al-Musawwar*, August 27, 2004, 48.

40. Mike Sell, ed., *Avant-Garde Performance and Material Exchange: Vectors of the Radical* (New York: Palgrave, 2011).

41. Rasha Abdel Moneim, *Tasa’wulat ‘an al-masrah al-hurr* (Cairo: Al-Markaz al-Hanajir li-l-Funun, 2009), n.p.

42. Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation*, 114.

43. Jeunes Createurs, “Taqatu’at min fawda yawmi,” January 26, 2004, program for festival, Centre Français de Culture et de la Coopération, Cairo, January 25–30, 2004.

44. Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 20.

45. Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 154.

46. Winegar, “Civilizing Muslim Youth.”

47. Quoted in Abdelnasser Hanafi, ed., *Al-mu’tamar al-‘ilmi li-l-masrah al-masri fi-l-aqalim al-dawra 2: Al-huwiya wa-l-tahaddiyat* (Cairo: General Organization of Cultural Palaces, 2007), 12.

48. Abeer Ali, interview by the author, June 26, 2009.

49. Essam el-Sayed, interview by the author, June 26, 2009.

50. Winegar, “Civilizing Muslim Youth,” 454.

51. Abeer Ali interview.

52. Masoud Shuman, interview by the author, July 14, 2009.

53. An article about Sharqawi’s workshop, “Durus galal al-sharqawi: Al-fannan al-kabir yuhadir fi warshat masrahina,” was published in *Masrahuna*, no. 59 (August 25, 2008): 6–7.

54. Laurie A. Frederik, *Trumpets in the Mountains: Theater and the Politics of National Culture in Cuba* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012), 103.

55. Ahmed Megahid, “Bana’ al-tifl . . . bana’ al-watan,” *Masrahuna*, no. 105 (July 13, 2009): 4; Yusri Hassaan, “La’ba w qabbalat jadd,” *Masrahuna*, no. 59 (August 25, 2008): 32.

56. This is the subtitle of the blog *Fifth September Group*, <http://fiveseptember.blogspot.com/>, accessed June 24, 2019.

57. “Bayan ta’sisi,” *Fifth September Group* (blog), September 25, 2005, http://fiveseptember.blogspot.com/2005/09/blog-post_112736915469263210.html.

58. Pierre Abi Saab, “Al-tadhaahura al-shahira tatahawwal li saha muwajaha siyasiya bayna al-mu’arada w al-nizam,” *Al-Hayaat*, September 25, 2005, reposted at http://fiveseptember.blogspot.com/2005/09/blog-post_112765711555365913.html.

59. The full list of signatories is available here: “Bayan sadir ‘ala jama’iya dirasat w al-tadrib al-firaq al-masrahiyya al-hurra w nukhba min nushata’ al-masrahiyin al-masriyin,” *Fifth September Group* (blog), September 17, 2005, http://fiveseptember.blogspot.com/2005/09/blog-post_112653306782143026.html.

60. “Muwazzafu wizarat al-thaqafa kumbars l-l-jumhur,” *Al-Quds Al-‘Arabi*, September 27, 2005, reposted at http://fiveseptember.blogspot.in/2005/09/blog-post_112798490815710373.html#links.

61. Abi Saab, “Al-tadhaahura.”

62. Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 31.

63. The manager of the Rawabet, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Khaliq, scheduled programming with technical support from the Townhouse Art Gallery (from which the cooperative rented the Rawabet space). There was “a funder,” he noted, and I learned later that this was the Ford Foundation. Since the politics of accepting funds from the American institution were controversial in the free theater movement, this information was not readily volunteered. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Khaliq, interview by the author, June 25, 2008.

64. Taylor writes that scene and scenario “stand in a metonymic relationship: the place allows us to think about the possibilities of the action. But action also defines place.” Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 29.

65. Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 38.

66. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 32.

67. Conteh-Morgan, “Other Avant-Garde,” 99.

Chapter 3

1. For example, Muhammad Bughdadi, “‘Ala al-tariqa al-amrikiyya: Al-la’b fi-l-dimagh!,” *Sabah al-Khayr*, March 9, 2004, 62; Nabil Bahgat, “Al-la’b fi al-dimagh: Da’wah li-l-muqawamah,” *Adab wa Naqd*, no. 223 (March 2004): 132–39; Amal Bakir, “Al-la’b fi-l-dimagh: Uslub jadid li-l-masrah al-masri fi markaz al-hanjir,” *Al-Ahram*, February 13, 2004, 38; Muhammad al-Rifa’i, “Al-la’b fi-l-dimagh,” *Sabah al-Khayr*, May 11, 2004, 70; Gamal ‘Umar, “‘Al-la’b fi al-dimagh’ jinaza masrahiya hara li al-umma al-arabiya,” *Al-Qahira*, February 24, 2004, 12.

2. ‘Abd al-Raziq Husayn, “Tajruba fanniya jadda: Al-la’b fi dimagh al-mushahidin wa al-mumattihilin,” *Akhir Sa’a*, February 4, 2004, 55.

3. Deleuze, "Postscript," 4.

4. Samuel Weber refers to the work of theater in the age of mass media as that of "*problematic re-localization*," or making concrete the transformations in the localized self as a result of its mediation. Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as Medium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 43.

5. Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey*.

6. An article in the popular weekly *Ruz al-Yusuf* bore the headline "Do the Programs of Determining One's Destiny Cause Psychic Illnesses in Contestants and Viewers?" Shayma' Samir, "Hal tasabbab baramij tahdid al-masir amradan nafsiyatan li-l-musabiqin wa al-mushahidin?," *Ruz al-Yusuf*, January 31–February 6, 2004, 70–71. Another article reported that a group of over forty professors at the medical school of Cairo University had even issued a joint appeal against viewing music videos. Ayman Matar, "Istigatha asatidhat al-tibb didd al-fidio klib," *Ruz al-Yusuf*, June 19–25, 2004, 87.

7. Mona Abaza, "Egyptianizing the American Dream: Nasr City's Shopping Malls, Public Order, and the Privatized Military," in Singerman and Amar, *Cairo Cosmopolitan*; Farha Ghannam, "Mobility, Liminality, and Embodiment in Urban Egypt," *American Ethnologist* 38, no. 4 (2011): 790–800.

8. Khaled el-Sawy, interview by the author, May 10, 2004.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Khaled el-Sawy, "Tajrubat al-la'b fi-l-dimagh," *Al-hiwar al-mutamaddan*, August 8, 2005, <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=42671&r=0>.

11. Hassan Abu al-'Ela, "Khaled el-Sawy: Aradtu an a'arrif al-nas man huwa al-sadiq wa man huwa al-'adu," *Al-Qahira*, March 2, 2004, 12.

12. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983), §4.

13. El-Sawy interview.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Khaled el-Sawy, "Al-la'b fi-l-dimagh" (unpublished, undated script), 3.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 7.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, 14.

20. *Ibid.*, 24.

21. *Ibid.*, 13.

22. Arguing for alienation effects as a theatrical strategy for making audiences think critically, Brecht wrote, "This technique [of alienation] allows the theatre to make use in its representations of the new social scientific method known as dialectical materialism. In order to unearth society's laws of motion this method treats social situations as processes, and traces out all their inconsistencies." Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," 1948, fragment 45, http://tenstakonsthall.se/uploads/139-Brecht_A_Short_Organum_for_the_Theatre.pdf.

23. El-Sawy, "Al-la'b fi-l-dimagh," 34.

24. *Ibid.*, 35.

25. Bahgat, "Da'wah li-l-muqawamah," 139.

26. Al-Rifa'i, "Al-la'b fi-l-dimagh," 70.

27. Ahmed el-Attar, interview by the author, November 30, 2003.

28. David Barnett, "When Is a Play Not a Drama? Two Examples of Postdramatic Theatre Texts," *New Theatre Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2008): 14–23.

29. Ahmed el-Attar, “Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire” (unpublished, undated script), scene 8.

30. Ibid., scene 21.

31. Ibid., scene 24.

32. Ibid., scene 12.

33. Ibid., scene 9.

34. Because of the sexual double entendre, this scene was not included in the script submitted to censors. There is thus no scene number for it in the printed script.

35. El-Attar, “Mother I Want to Be a Millionaire,” scene 27.

36. Menha el-Batraoui, “Le miroir de la médiocrité,” *Al-Abram Hebdo*, February 11, 2004, <http://hebdo.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2004/2/11/arts1.htm> (no longer available).

37. Nehad Selaiha, “Brilliant Form, Bleak Vision,” *Al-Abram Weekly*, February 26–March 3, 2004, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/archive/2004/679/cu4.htm>.

38. Wa’il Lutfi, “Shabab al-masrah al-masri yafdahuna akadhib wa ala’ib al-fada’iyat,” *Ruz al-Yusuf*, February 12–26, 2004, 78.

39. Neil McFarquhar, “Cairo Journal: Who Messes with Egyptian Minds? Satirist Points at U.S.,” *New York Times*, March 18, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/18/world/cairo-journal-who-messes-with-egyptian-minds-satirist-points-at-us.html>.

40. El-Sawy, “Tajrubat al-la’b fi-l-dimagh.”

41. Ibid.

42. The epigraph was an Arabic translation of Luxemburg’s statement, “When oppression is the law, resistance becomes a duty.”

43. Litvin, *Hamlet’s Arab Journey*.

44. Barnett, “When Is a Play Not a Drama?,” 17.

Chapter 4

1. For the association of folk culture with rural women in Algeria, see Jane Goodman, *Berber Culture on the World Stage: From Village to Video* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); in Lebanon, see Christopher Stone, *Popular Culture and Nationalism in Lebanon: The Fairouz and Rahbani Nation* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

2. Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

3. Karin Van Nieuwkerk, *A Trade like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

4. The mission statement was printed in the program distributed at the November 2001 performance of *The Storyteller Said* at Beit al-Harrawi in Cairo.

5. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 79–80.

6. In Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman’s typology of genre in folklore, intertextual gaps offer ways of commenting on genre, as well as deploying it. A minimal intertextual gap, which mimes genre features of the old text in the new, is traditionalizing. As such, they emphasize that “relations between intertextuality and ideology can be read in both directions—in terms of the way that broader social, cultural, ideological, and political-economic formations shape and empower intertextual strategies and the manner in which ideologies of intertextuality and

their associated practices shape society and history.” Charles L. Briggs and Richard Bauman, “Genre, Intertextuality, and Social Power.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 2, no. 2 (1992): 160.

7. Elin Diamond explicates the feminist potential of mimesis performed by showing the relationship of the symbolic to the real in ways that allow for its transformation. A feminist performance would thus “take the relation to the real as productive, not referential, geared to change, not to reproducing the same.” Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (New York: Routledge, 1997), xvi. It is not enough for a performer to act a feminist role if she lacks a frame in which her gesture is perceived as transformative. Staging devices and textual genres are two examples of frames that can orient an audience to perceiving the feminist gesture of a performance.

8. Mirette Mikhail, interview by the author, February 15, 2004.

9. Mirette Mikhail, interview by the author, March 2, 2004.

10. Mersal said in an interview that she had always found literary Arabic to be “a space of pleasure,” as she grew up reading literature that described matters of love otherwise rarely discussed by middle-class girls in her hometown of Mansura. See Niloofar Haeri, *Sacred Language, Ordinary People: Dilemmas of Culture and Politics in Egypt* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 115.

11. The all-woman panel included the translator of the volume, Sanaa Selaiha; actors Salwa Muhammad Ali and Caroline Khalil; critic Nehad Selaiha; Hanager director Hoda Wasfi; and director Effat Yehia. See my newspaper article on this panel: Sonali Pahwa, “In Search of the Carnavalesque,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, January 29–February 4, 2004, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2004/675/cu5.htm>.

12. Mikhail interview, March 2, 2004.

13. In the original script, the line read, “A woman who has a body like mine must be terrified, like a small, gray, petrified mouse.” Mirette Mikhail, “Tafasil” [“Details”] (unpublished script, 2004), p. 1, lines 4–5.

14. Marguerite Duras, *The Lover*, trans. Barbara Bray (London: William Collins, Sons, 1985), 16.

15. *Ibid.*, 17–18.

16. *Ibid.*, 35.

17. Mikhail interview, March 2, 2004.

18. Mikhail, “Tafasil,” p. 2, lines 44–46.

19. Rehearsal of *Details*, January 20, 2004.

20. Mikhail, “Tafasil,” 2.

21. *Ibid.* In the English translation, the line reads, “I wonder how I had the strength to go against my mother’s prohibition. So calmly, with such determination.” Duras, *Lover*, 39.

22. Briggs and Bauman, “Genre, Intertextuality, and Social Power,” 147.

23. José Muñoz has written of the burden of liveness as a problem for all minoritarian subjects condemned to perform their identities repeatedly for the approval and amusement of elites. He notes a particular burden on those enlisted in intercultural performance, which resonates with the self-representation of a minoritized woman before the avant-garde establishment. See Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 187–88.

24. ‘Ali al-Ra’i, *Masrah al-sha’b* (Cairo: Dar al-Sharqiyat, 1993).

25. Idris, *Nahwa masrah 'arabi*.

26. Abd al-Rahman al-Shafi'i, "Ashiq al-maddahin: 'Ard takhta hudud al-furja wa al-munasiba," in *Funun al-furja al-sha'biyya* (Cairo: Al-Markaz al-Qawmi li-l-Masrah wa al-Musiqa wa al-Funun al-Sha'biyya, 2002), 112.

27. Nawwar, *Ru'ya mustaqbaliyya*, 5.

28. Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 116.

29. Abeer Ali, interview by the author, September 8, 2007.

30. For example, Ahmed Ismail's play *Al-Shatir Hasan*, which was performed through the 1990s in his home village of Shubra Bekhoum as well as at General Organization of Cultural Palaces festivals in Cairo. Ismail was Ali's mentor, and she worked as an assistant director for *Al-Shatir Hasan*.

31. All quotations of *Harem Tales* are taken from a photocopy of a handwritten, undated, unpaginated manuscript.

32. Luis Gris, "Al-misahharati wa bagugu!," *Sabah al-Khayr*, August 24, 2004, 69.

33. Nehad Selaiha, "Something for Everyone," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, November 11–17, 2004, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2004/716/cu4.htm>.

34. Ali interview, September 8, 2007.

35. Weber, *Theatricality as Medium*, 43.

36. I draw on Muñoz's concept of disidentification as a practice of recycling symbols in order to rethink a dominant cultural ideology with minoritized subjects at its center. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 31.

Chapter 5

1. In Foucault's genealogy of asceticism that grew out of ancient Greek practices, "it was not a strengthening of public authority that accounted for the development of that rigorous ethics, but rather a weakening of the political and social framework within which the lives of individuals used to unfold." Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, vol. 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 41.

2. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 148.

3. See Yasmin Moll, "Islamic Televangelism: Religion, Media and Visuality in Contemporary Egypt," *Arab Media and Society*, no. 10 (Spring 2010), <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=732>.

4. See Ahmed Kanna, "Flexible Citizenship in Dubai: Neoliberal Subjectivity in the Emerging 'City-Corporation,'" *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 1 (2010): 100–129.

5. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

6. Mayssoun Sukarieh, "The Hope Crusades: Culturalism and Reform in the Arab World," *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 35, no. 1 (2012): 116.

7. Amira Mittermaier, "Beyond Compassion: Islamic Volunteerism in Egypt." *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 3 (2014): 520.

8. Ramsi Lehner, interview by the author, August 23, 2007.

9. Bonnie Urcuioli, "Skills and Selves in the New Workplace," *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 2 (2008): 224.

10. A fuller history of the studio, and its list of funders, is available on the English-language section of its website: http://seefoundation.org/v2/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1.

11. Jessica Winegar compares these *wasatiyya* (centrist) Islamist intellectuals, who developed art programs in the 1990s, to their secularist counterparts in the state sector who also believed in culture as a means of civilizing youth. See Winegar, “Civilizing Muslim Youth,” 446.

12. From the “About Us” page of the Sakia’s website in English, accessed August 14, 2008, <http://culturewheel.com/sections/el-sakia/about-us> (no longer available).

13. Ahmed Ramzi, interview by the author, August 14, 2008.

14. Injy el-Batrawy, interview by the author, August 14, 2008.

15. On the controversial phenomenon of Egyptian art with an (Islamic) mission in the early twenty-first century, see Karin Van Nieuwkerk, “Of Morals, Missions, and the Market: New Religiosity and ‘Art with a Mission’ in Egypt,” in *Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps, and Revolutionary Theater*, ed. Karin Van Nieuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

16. Mittermaier writes that Resala is a volunteer organization that uses religious rhetoric to encourage voluntarism but is not explicitly religious. Mittermaier, “Beyond Compassion,” 521.

17. For a version of this Islamist corporate self-help in Indonesia, see Daromir Rudnyckj, “Spiritual Economies: Islam and Neoliberalism in Contemporary Indonesia,” *Cultural Anthropology* 24, no. 1 (2009): 104–41.

18. See Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*; Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

19. Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labor,” 139.

20. Winegar describes the participation of art students and other middle-class Cairo youth in the clean-up of Tahrir Square after Mubarak’s resignation on February 11, 2011, as a performance of civilized citizenship. Jessica Winegar, “A Civilized Revolution: Aesthetics and Political Action in Egypt,” *American Ethnologist* 43, no. 4 (2016): 609–22.

21. Julia Elyachar, *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development, and the State in Cairo* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 94.

22. Deleuze, “Postscript,” 5; italics in the original.

23. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 222.

24. Sukarieh, “Hope Crusades.”

Chapter 6

1. Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 2012), 9.

2. Mohamed Samir el-Khatib, “Tahrir Square as Spectacle: Some Exploratory Remarks on Place, Body, and Power,” *Theatre Research International* 38, no. 2 (2013): 110.

3. Winegar, “Civilized Revolution.”

4. Sahar Keraitim and Samia Mehrez, “*Mulid al-Tabrir*: Semiotics of a Revolution,” in *Translating Egypt’s Revolution: The Language of Tabrir*, ed. Samia Mehrez (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012), 46.

5. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.

6. I use the term “scenario” as defined by Diana Taylor: “culturally specific imaginaries—sets of possibilities, ways of conceiving conflict, crisis, or resolution.” Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 13.

7. Pop-up performances appealed particularly to independent dramatists after the exceptional freedoms of 2011 were replaced by crackdowns by a rebuilt police state. Most alarmingly, the massacre of over a thousand Muslim Brotherhood supporters at Raba’a Square in August 2013 revealed the logistical and ideological danger of using street protest to take the goals of the revolution forward. Spectacular images of “million-man marches” organized by various political parties were now deployed to justify both the military’s coup and its violent crackdown on oppositional protesters.

8. Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 51.

9. Harding and Rouse, introduction, 2.

10. Julia Elyachar, “The Political Economy of Movement and Gesture in Cairo,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17 (2011): 82–99; Michael Herzfeld, “The Cultural Politics of Gesture: Reflections on the Embodiment of Ethnographic Practice,” *Ethnography* 10, no. 2 (2009): 131–52.

11. Writing of gestures in the context of dance, Juana Maria Rodriguez points out their particular potential for evoking shared feelings of subaltern identity. “As a mode of critique, gesture emphasizes how a cascade of everyday actions is capable of altering political life.” Juana Maria Rodriguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 5.

12. *Ibid.*, 48.

13. Egyptian dramatic performances in highly policed public spaces after the revolution were doubly out of place, as the dramatists belonged properly to the domain of culture rather than politics, and in theaters rather than the street. They can be read as disruptions of what Jacques Rancière has called the “distribution of the sensible” among social actors, “based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed.” Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 12–13.

14. In the immediate aftermath of Mubarak’s overthrow, most of these documentary dramas were performed in theaters owned by the Ministry of Culture and General Organization of Cultural Palaces.

15. Dalia Basiouny, “Performance through the Egyptian Revolution: Stories from Tahrir,” in *Doomed by Hope: Essays on Arab Theatre*, ed. Eyad Houssami (London: Pluto, 2012), 52.

16. Margaret Litvin, “From Tahrir to ‘Tahrir’: Some Theatrical Impulses toward the Egyptian Uprising,” *Theatre Research International* 38, no. 2 (2013): 119.

17. Schielke, *Egypt in the Future Tense*, 180.

18. Nesreen Hussein, “Gestures of Resistance between the Street and the Theatre: Documentary Theatre in Egypt and Laila Soliman’s *No Time for Art*,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 25, no. 3 (2015): 359.

19. Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), 12.

20. See Samuli Schielke, “Policing Ambiguity: Muslim Saints-Day Festivals and the Moral Geography of Public Space in Egypt,” *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 4 (2008): 539–52.

21. Jacques Rancière, “Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, nos. 2–3 (2004): 298.
22. “About Clowns without Borders,” Clowns without Borders, accessed June 4, 2019, <http://www.clownswithoutborders.org/about-us/>.
23. Herzfeld, “Cultural Politics of Gesture,” 133.
24. Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 18.
25. James M. Harding, “From Cutting Edge to Rough Edges: On the Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance,” in Harding and Rouse, *Not the Other Avant-Garde*, 25.
26. Herzfeld, “Cultural Politics of Gesture,” 135.
27. Jeffrey Juris, “Performing Politics: Image, Embodiment, and Affective Solidarity during Anti-corporate Globalization Protests,” *Ethnography* 9, no. 1 (2008): 61–97.
28. In their modest intervention into urban life, these entertainments produced “a subtly altered subjectivity for those involved but not necessarily a radical de-alienation.” Paul Simpson, “Street Performance and the City: Public Space, Sociality, and Intervening in the Everyday,” *Space and Culture* 14, no. 4 (2011): 417.
29. Keraitim and Mehrez, “*Mulid al-Tahrir*,” 29.
30. Litvin, “From Tahrir to ‘Tahrir,’” 118.
31. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 162.

Conclusion

1. The nongovernmental organization had been working in Egypt since 2005, with funding from the United Nations Population Fund. Its mission of peer education for youth is outlined on its English-language website: “Y-PEER: Empowering Young People to Empower Each Other,” United Nations Population Fund, May 26, 2006, <https://www.unfpa.org/news/y-peer-empowering-young-people-empower-each-other>. The Egyptian website I accessed in 2014 is no longer in service, perhaps as a result of the Sisi regime’s crackdown on foreign nongovernmental organizations. It translated Y-Peer’s mission locally as educating youth on their own terms. “We offer them youth-friendly techniques and engage them in their language to break the barriers of boredom and monotony, which renders the process of information sharing fun and interactive, while preserving the accuracy of information transferred among youth.” “About Us,” Y-PEER Egypt, accessed July 20, 2014, <http://www.ypeeregypt.com/profile.php>.

2. First developed by Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal in the 1970s, when Brazil was under military dictatorship, the Theater of the Oppressed has become a transnationally popular method of social theater. Among its practitioners is the *ImaginAction* group, founded by Colombian Hector Aristizabál and working across the Global South. Augusto Boal, “Theatre of the Oppressed,” *ImaginAction*, 2004, <http://imaginaction.org/media/our-methods/theatre-of-the-oppressed-2>.

3. The expulsion of popular opera director Inas Abdel Dayem, following that of the head of the General Egyptian Book Organization, brought the unrest surrounding the minister’s purge of old regime cultural officials to a head. Performers in the May 2013 opera *Aida* held protest signs onstage, and members of the ballet performed at the sit-in at the Ministry of Culture that June. For more details, see Ingy Hassieb, “Artists Say Egypt Culture Minister Trying to Quash Free Expression,”

Los Angeles Times, June 16, 2013, <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-xpm-2013-jun-16-la-fg-wn-artists-egyptian-culture-minister-20130616-story.html>.

4. Singer and writer Fairuz Karawya, formerly of the independent Misahharati theater troupe, spoke to a journalist of her failed attempt to discuss reforming the Ministry of Culture when she visited the sit-in. Maha ElNabawi, “Inside the Culture Ministry,” *Mada Masr*, June 28, 2013, <https://madamasr.com/en/2013/06/28/feature/culture/inside-the-culture-ministry/>.

5. Full details on the initiative in Arabic and English are available here: Mahatat for Contemporary Art, “About,” Facebook, accessed June 4, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/pg/MahatatCollective/about/?ref=page_internal.

6. “Director’s Welcome,” Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival program, April 4–28, 2013, 3.

7. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), 6.

8. Frank Wilderson. *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 57.

9. Schielke, *Egypt in the Future Tense*, 214.

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