

Report from Cairo's International Festival for Experimental Theatre

The Fifteenth Cairo's International Festival for Experimental Theatre opened on September 1, 2003 at the main hall of the Opera House with a dance performance of "A Sculptor's Dream" by director-choreographer Walid Aouni. Born in Lebanon, Aouni settled in Egypt in the early 1990's and has become one of its most significant choreographers. "A Sculptor's Dream" was awarded Best Scenography by the festival judges.

Over eighty productions from more than thirty countries were presented over eleven days of the festival. The sixteen theatres hosting the performances were scattered around Cairo's numerous neighborhoods, some of them easier to find than others. Many of the events including opening and closing night ceremonies were held at the new Opera House, part of the Ministry of Culture complex housing the Library of Music, Modern Art Museum, and a number of smaller galleries in a garden setting near the Cairo Tower in the Gezira island in the middle of the Nile river.

San Francisco Bay Area was well represented at the festival with Erik Ehn, Denmo Ibrahim, Christopher White, Arlene Hood and Torange Yeghiazarian present, all currently involved in Golden Thread Productions' ReOrient festival of short plays about the Middle East. Roberta Levitow, a freelance director from Los Angeles was among the artists honored by the festival committee.

South Korea's "Karma," was awarded the prize for Best Production. Rooted in Kabuki, "Karma" incorporated dance and pantomime in depicting the cycle of life and the perpetual search for a fulfilling union. Comic scenes of the newlywed couple fighting lightened the skillfully executed layers of traditional Kabuki. Live dubbing of the actors dialogue and the enchanting live music created an atmosphere of magic complemented by the all-white costumes and a minimal set made up of white sheets and wooden sticks used with extreme versatility.

The award for the best ensemble work went to Egypt's Al Hanager Youth Theatre's production of "Masks, Fabrics and Destinies" directed by Hany El-Metnawy. The 35-member ensemble cast worked on a multi-level stage with two clear plastic booths on either side of the lower level and the musicians and drummers above. Foam masks and multitudes of sheets were used to create a series of creative tableaux some inspiring the audience to loud applause. In the closing scene of the play, the cast brought the two booths together creating one very tight clear plastic space stuffed with humans clinging and clawing at the walls. The Al Hanager theatre was named as such because it is housed in an old airplane hanger!

Among the most satisfying performances were one by Inad (Stubborn) Theatre, a Palestinian troupe making its way to Egypt against monumental odds, presenting "My Dreams Have No Limits," a lyrical tale based on the writings of Che Guevara on fighting oppression where ever it may lure; and "Wipe Off Your Tears and Keep Standing" by Izuba Theatre of Rwanda depicting scenes from the genocide and its aftermath.

Other winners included Gabor Goda of Hungary (best director), Josephine Anderson of Sweden (best actress), and Helal Antar of Algeria (best actor). Perhaps the most frequently debated topic of the festival was the definition of "experimental" and whether its use in the title of the festival actually discouraged artists whose work may not be in the tradition of the experiments of the 60's and 70's, rather newer more pertinent experiments with local culture and performance traditions.

The San Francisco Bay area group was privileged to attend performances by and meet artists from one of only two independent theatre companies in Egypt, El Warsha (the workshop). The company's work is unique in that it combines training, research and performance in its daily schedule of the ensemble, some members of which have been working together for over fifteen years. Lead by Hassan El Geretly, the company's work is currently focused on the daily life of Cairo studying and building everyday characters from the old neighborhoods of the city and representing them in vignettes supported with popular songs and cityscape sounds, all performed by company members.

Cairo's International Festival for Experimental Theatre offered a unique opportunity for exposure to plays from around the globe, many productions of which would never be presented in the United States due to the sheer unwieldiness of distance, funding and possibly the perceived lack of interest.

APPENDIX

Viewing Committee:

Martha Coigney (USA) Honorary president of the International Theatre Institute
Ginka Tscholakaowa-Henle (Germany) Playwright, director
Zbigniew Taranienko (Poland) Playwright, critic

Jury:

Brian Singleton (Ireland)
Ana Rosa Barrionuevo (Argentina)
Anatoly Vassiliev (Russia)

Ilse Scheer (Germany)
Jean Randich (US)
Jean Michel Meunier (France)
Salvatore Bitonti (Italy)
Freddy Decreus (Belgium)
Michel Vais (Canada)
Nehad Seleiha (Egypt)
Younis Al-Walidi (Morocco)

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