

“I Tell the People”

*New values and new aesthetics in Najīb Surūr’s theory of drama*¹

MONICA RUOCCO

‘Authenticity’ and ‘Popular Theatre’: the dominant discourse of Arabic drama since the 1960s

The 1960s represented an important turning point not only for Arabic narrative but also for drama, a genre that in this period began to express new values through the emergence of new aesthetics of performance. The protagonists of Arabic drama—authors, directors, and actors—were engaged in a passionate artistic confrontation concerning new forms of writing and staging, aimed at creating a revolutionary movement that would reject the artistic experiences of the past.

Although in the 1960s there was not yet any explicit mention of ‘experimental theatre’, it was this decade that saw the foundations laid for a strongly politicized form of theatre that was to become widespread in subsequent decades, at the heart of which was the concept of ‘authenticity’. For a number of artists, a moment that was crucial in the launching of this movement and for the subsequent development of Arabic theatre was the conference held in Hammamet, Tunisia, from the 14th to the 21st of January 1965. Preceded by other encounters, such as that held in 1963 in Bellagio, on Lake Como (Italy), the conference tackled various issues, from the role of theatre in Arabic culture to the question of language, to relationships with religion and with political institutions. Nevertheless, the aspect that seemed most to concern the participants was the relationship with the audience, considered fundamental in a period when the nationalist, post-colonial policies of many Arab nations supported the participation of citizens in social reform. The artists present at Hammamet found themselves in agreement upon the rejection of a theatre aimed at privileged categories of spectators: Arabic theatre, in its role as a public service, had an obligation to be popular and universal, addressing *all* the Arabic people. At this point, the so-called ‘Italian-style theatre’ no longer seemed relevant to the requirements of a theatre striving to be authentically Arabic. Rather, the closing manifesto of the meeting invited authors and directors from all the countries of Maghreb and Mashreq to develop theatrical forms closer to Arabic culture, in all its various expressions. It is no accident that the very participants at this meeting, the Lebanese Anṭwān Multaḡā, the Algerian ‘Abd al-Raḡmān Kākī, the Moroccan al-Ṭayyib al-Ṣiddīqī, the Tunisian ‘Alī bin ‘Iyād, the Jordanian Akram Dabbāgh, the

1 The present research has been carried out with funding from the Department of Philological Sciences of the University of Palermo for the research project “The evolution of performance and dramatic literature in the Arab world” (funding for University Scientific Research for 2007).

Syrian Sharīf Khāzindār (Chérif Khaznadar), are the pioneers in their respective countries of a theatrical experimentation that was, over the coming years, to involve an ever-growing number of writers, based on a re-reading, in a modern framework, of Arabic cultural heritage.

It can therefore be confidently asserted that it was these very encounters at Hammamet that saw the basis established for an important movement that continues to flourish today, although with different aims. The question of the authenticity of Arabic theatre was to be developed further at subsequent encounters, such as those in Casablanca (1966), Beirut (1967), Hammamet again (1970) and Rabat (1974), where the relationship between the new Arabic theatre and Western models was to be analyzed in more depth:

during the 1960s and 1970s, [...] a number of the leading dramatists of the Arab world began to look toward indigenous performance traditions for inspiration and as a counter-balance to the previous, almost total dependance upon European models.²

As far as Egypt is concerned, scholars usually find the first examples of this traditionalization process in the preface written by Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm to the play *Yā ṭālī' al-shajarah* (publ. 1962) and in his *Qālibunā al-masrahī* (publ. 1967)³ as well as in the articles written by Yūsuf Idrīs in 1964 for the literary periodical *al-Kātib*, collected in the volume *Naḥwa masrah miṣrī* (Towards an Egyptian Theatre).⁴ The two Egyptian playwrights, however, express in their essays different opinions concerning the use of popular forms. Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm considers

the artistic traditions of his own culture [as] ‘the true ground which held in its bosom’ the material of this so-called ‘totally modern art’⁵

in a project that could reconcile the European theatrical avant-garde with an innovative, authentically Arabic and Egyptian drama. Conversely, Idrīs claims the existence of a native Arab theatrical tradition, and for him the revival of popular forms means liberating the Egyptian theatre from its dependence upon European models.⁶

On the one hand, this trend that emerges on the Egyptian scene from the 1960s finds its roots in cultural campaigns which “coincided with an increase in scholarly and governmental interest in the revival of the heritage of Egyptian folklore”.⁷ On the other hand, as scholars astutely highlight,

Idris’s campaign to free himself from European traditions led him somewhat paradoxically, but not inconsistently, to develop a strategy exactly parallel to that of an

2 Amine & Carlson 2008: 72.

3 al-Ḥakīm, *Yā ṭālī' al-shajarah* [1962]; id., *Qālibunā al-masrahī* (1967).

4 Idrīs 1974: 467-95. An overview of Idrīs’s play can be found in Burt 2001: 39-76.

5 Carlson affirms that al-Ḥakīm’s preface to *Yā ṭālī' al-shajarah* “has never been translated at all, although there is a French translation of one section of the preface in the collection *Anthologie de la Littérature Arabe Contemporaine: Les Essais*, ed. and tr. Anouar Abdel-Malek (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965): 420-425”, cf. Carlson 2006: 143, n. 9. Actually, an integral translation of this text has been published in Italian by Adalgisa De Simone, in: al-Ḥakīm 1971: xv-xxxi.

6 Idrīs 1974: 495.

7 Allen 2000: 207.

important segment of the European avant-garde, seeking a regeneration of the drama by a sophisticated reworking of popular and folk traditions.⁸

The efforts shared by many leading Arab playwrights and directors from both Maghreb and Mashreq to conceive performances that seek inspiration in popular traditions,⁹ are also connected to a ‘Third World Theatre Movement’ that arose during the 1960s and 1970s. For instance, the participants in the First Third World Theatre Conference held in Manila at the end of the 1960s agreed that the theatre

should develop ways and means to bring its performances to popular audiences in both urban and rural communities and should endeavour to give expression in its artistic work to the needs and aspirations of these popular audiences.¹⁰

Seven years later, in 1973, a Second Third World Theatre Conference was to be held in Shiraz dealing with “Theatre as a Powerful instrument for Social Change”. During the meeting Chérif Khaznadar wrote the famous resolution entitled “Tendencies and Prospect for Third World Theatre”.¹¹ The idea underlying this manifesto is first of all to claim the existence of an authentic Asian, African, and Latin American theatre; then, to preserve indigenous cultural traditions in order to reflect the identity of specific nations and peoples, avoiding the temptation to “imitate Western forms of theatre, constructing theatres that were copied from Western models and subsidizing groups inspired by the same model”.¹² According to Khaznadar, Third World Theatre had to realize that

between pure and simple imitation of Western dramatic forms and the reconstruction of past forms, a third path is open to the nations of the Third World: that of renewing their heritage, beginning with the past and assimilating into it the given facts of contemporary evolution.¹³

In the same period, also in the West—in Europe as in the United States and Latin America—, many dramatists and directors invoked the revival of several marginal forms of cultural expression such as street theatre, mask theatre, puppet theatre, shadow theatre and so on.¹⁴ To mention but a few, starting with Jerzy Grotowski, the Living Theatre which inaugurated a new phase in 1960, the same year as the foundation of The Bread and Puppet Theater; the Odin Teatret founded by Eugenio Barba and the Théâtre du Soleil created by Ariane Mnouchkine in 1964; El Teatro Campesino founded in 1965, ending with the Theatre of the Oppressed theorized by the Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal at the beginning of the 1970s.

All these dramatists rejected the idea of a bourgeois, Aristotelian, cathartic drama that could reassure the audience. They tried to transfer revolution into the theatre. Their aim

8 Carlson 2006: 133.

9 ‘Atīyyah 1990.

10 Cf. Khaznadar/Deák 1973: 33.

11 Ibid.: 33-35.

12 Ibid.: 34.

13 Ibid.: 35.

14 For a complete overview about world theatre in the Sixties cf. Harding/Rosenthal 2006.

was not simply the creation of a popular theatre: they proposed a form of theatre that could bring onto the stage a people's culture, language, and needs.

In the panorama of Arabic theatre, Egyptian poet, playwright, the works of actor and director Najīb Surūr's represent an original and mature way of approaching the revival and re-emergence of popular practices of cultural expression. Surūr imagined an Egyptian 'popular' theatre, but based upon Western models, and he expressed his ideas in theoretical essays on dramatic criticism that have often been neglected by critics and scholars of Arabic theatre.

Najīb Surūr's Theory of Drama

Najīb Surūr's theatre has habitually been categorized under the simplistic definition of 'folk drama'. Opportunely, some critics have shown a renewed interest in his works, for instance Mahmoud el-Lozy who, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of Surūr's death, points out that

[n]ow that the dust has settled over the fierce artistic battles of the sixties and seventies it has been more than convenient to reduce Surūr's dramatic output to 'folk drama'. Because quite a few of Surūr's poetic dramas are based on folk stories or make extensive use of popular sayings, he has been neatly labelled as a pioneer of what is currently perceived as one of the most acceptable forms of Egyptian drama.¹⁵

Considered one of the most controversial dramatist on the Egyptian scene of the 1960s, Surūr "continues to be a cult figure among theatre people and the literati".¹⁶ Born in June 1932 in a little village, Akhṭāb or Ikhṭāb, in al-Daqahliyyah governorate east of the Delta, Najīb Surūr was forced by the regime to spend his last years in a mental institution in Damanhūr not far from Alexandria, after a period spent in al-ʿAbbāsiyyah asylum in Cairo, where the dramatist underwent electric shock treatment. Najīb Surūr died on 24 October 1978.¹⁷

During his lifetime Najīb Surūr was simultaneously highly esteemed and ostracized. His admirers and followers—the critic Fārūq ʿAbd al-Qādir coined the term *Darāwīsh Najīb Surūr* (Najīb Surūr's dervishes) to describe them—were fascinated by his "charisma". Conversely, for his many detractors, his eccentricity was the expression of an unstable and confused mind:

A rebellious leader and a source of inspiration to his followers, he was a noisy troublemaker and inconsiderate and an ungrateful individual to those he systemati-

15 El-Lozy 1998.

16 Selaiha 2007. Nehad Selaiha wrote this article in occasion of the seventy fifth anniversary of Surūr's birth, which was celebrated with the representation of the play *Kān gadaʿ* (He was quite a guy), written by ʾImān al-Širāfi, one of Surūr's disciples.

17 Immediately after his death, the Syrian periodical *al-Ḥayāt al-masraḥiyyah* dedicated to Surūr a dossier in which the dramatist was remembered for having broken the barriers between poetry and drama, and between written and spoken language. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (ed.) 1978.

cally antagonised, most of whom occupied powerful positions within the infrastructure of official culture.¹⁸

Surūr wrote many plays,¹⁹ five of which are usually defined ‘poetic dramas’, three dramatic adaptations, five unconventional collections of poems, and four collections of essays on poetic and dramatic criticism; he directed five plays, acted in four plays and had a role in a film. Surūr’s collected works reveal a well-defined project accomplished in different artistic forms.

Surūr was born in a peasant milieu, which remains the favourite setting for many of his plays. He decided to study law at ‘Ayn Shams University but he quit the faculty in his second year, after the 1952 revolution. A supporter of Nasser’s revolutionary cause, he chose to propagate the nationalist ideology as an intellectual and dramatist. So began his training in drama, acting and directing at the Cairo Institute of Dramatic Arts, *al-Ma’had al-‘ālī li’l-funūn al-masrahīyyah*. Like many young Egyptians of that time, his idealistic enthusiasm for the nationalist cause was sincere, as was his confidence in the possibility of changing Egyptian society through politically committed activity.²⁰ In 1956, immediately after his graduation, he became the director of the *Firqat al-masrah al-sha‘bī* (The Popular Theatre Company) “which carried the new revolutionary ideas into the provinces”.²¹ Because of his loyalty to the regime, he was appointed a member of the public censor’s office, the same office that years later would ban his works.

In 1958, Surūr left Egypt on a state mission to the Soviet Union and Hungary to complete his theatrical education. When Surūr returned to Egypt, in 1964, he adapted Chekhov’s *Cherry Orchard* for the Pocket Théâtre as *Masrah al-jayb*, a project that would strongly influence the Egyptian playwright’s subsequent production. Surūr then became a member of the teaching staff at the Institute of Dramatic Arts. Under the direction of Karam Miṭāwi (recently returned from Rome), he presented, at the Pocket Theatre, the first play of his famous trilogy, *Yāsīn wa-Bahīyyah*, written while he was in Budapest between the end of 1963 and the beginning of 1964.²²

Surūr’s career would come to an end a few years later as a result of two events: Egypt’s defeat in the Six-Day War in June 1967 and the failure of his marriage:

coming in close succession, the two shocks shattered Sorour’s burgeoning self-confidence and faith in the future, aggravating his sense of insecurity and awakening his latent persecution complex.²³

At the end of the 1960s Surūr suffered a period of economic and professional problems, and decided to speak of his situation in a dramatic letter sent to the journal *al-Kawākib* in which he complained about his precarious conditions.²⁴

18 El-Lozy 1998.

19 For a list of Surūr’s plays cf. bibliography.

20 Crabbs Jr. 1975: 386-420.

21 Selaiha 2007.

22 Cf. the preface of ‘Iṣām al-Dīn Abū ‘l-‘Ulā to Surūr 1993: 5.

23 Selaiha 2007.

24 Cf. *al-Kawākib*, no. 906 (10 Dec 1968). The letter is reproduced by ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd (ed.) 1978: 164.

After this, Surūr was forced to quit his teaching post at the Institute of Dramatic Arts, was ignored by his colleagues, persecuted by the cultural authorities and censors and, finally, confined to mental hospitals. Nevertheless, he continued to write for the theatre. In the mid-1970s, Surūr began to suffer from recurring bouts of depression and the censors banned his works. During the 1976-77 season, censorship prohibited the staging of the play *Qūlū li-ʿen el-shams*, whose direction, because of Surūr’s health conditions, had been entrusted to Tawfīq ʿAbd al-Laṭīf.²⁵

To understand the true nature of Najīb Surūr’s theatre, it is imperative to consider the theoretical texts he wrote about his idea of drama. Surūr made his first attempts to elaborate a personal theory about drama in an essay entitled *Takhḥīṭāt fī ʿl-masrah al-miṣrī* (Sketches of Egyptian Drama), characterized by crushing remarks and general acrimony. An excerpt was published in 1957 in the Lebanese review *al-Ādāb*.²⁶

In the article published by *al-Ādāb*, Surūr complained about the lack of serious studies on the origin and the development of Egyptian theatre. Even at the Institute of Dramatic Arts, professors generally taught European drama, completely neglecting Egyptian theatre:

How do they expect us to be actors and understand the requirements of our people—respond to their needs—without knowing anything about our popular heritage? We know little about our cultural heritage; we know neither if nor how our national history has influenced its evolution. It is impossible to understand the crisis of our theatre if we ignore our past.²⁷

In this article Surūr links the different theatrical genres to the social classes which had produced them, to the political and economic context in which they were created. According to Surūr, the most significant contributions to the development of Egyptian theatre came from those artists who privileged the creation of a social drama. Above all, Surūr shows his admiration for the figures of ʿAzīz ʿĪd, Najīb al-Riḥānī and Sayyid Darwīsh, whose writing for Muḥammad Taymūr’s *al-ʿAsharah al-ṭayyibah* he recalls. Through their comedies written and acted in colloquial language, they were able to comment on the economic crisis—in particular the crisis in cotton prices during the first World War—that followed the British occupation. He then recalls the work of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Rushdī, who privileged the dramatic text in *ʿāmmiyyah*—declaimed rather than sung—and gave voice to the expectations of the middle class. The crisis of Egyptian theatre—according to Surūr—began with the birth of the Ramsīs Company directed by Yūsuf Wahbī. In Surūr’s opinion this company, specializing in melodramas, was the expression of the dominant class, and represented the collapse of the 1919 revolution, and the consequent failure of the middle class. The Ramsīs Company transformed social issues into mannerism, and its success resulted mainly from the financial resources that made the company able to organize huge and costly productions, as well as to engage the best actors and directors of that time, such as ʿAzīz ʿĪd.

Later on, continues Surūr, more precisely in 1927, as a result of a serious economical crisis, the Egyptian theatre nearly ended, and companies began to organize tours, which

25 ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (ed.) 1978: 168.

26 Najīb Surūr, “Takhḥīṭāt fī ʿl-masrah al-miṣrī,” *al-Ādāb*, 5/1 (1957): ʒ-m.

27 *Ibid.*: ʒ.

took them out of the country, especially to Maghreb. The only dramatist who continued to try to elaborate a theatre for the people was al-Rīḥānī who, in the meantime, had returned from the United States. From 1936 onwards, the government started to participate in founding new theatrical companies, but the situation did not improve. Those who had tried to understand the reasons for this crisis, Surūr writes, had ascribed it to the dramatists, the directors, the actors, and the public. But, for Surūr, there is only one reason that could explain the crisis of the theatre in Egypt: the absence of freedom. The only possible solution, according to Surūr, was the birth of a “nationalist theatre”,²⁸ which could support Nasser’s thought.

It is clear that these reflections arose during a time when Surūr was decisively convinced by the nationalist project, a conviction that was to be definitively extinguished after 1967. It was to be another decade before Surūr, already the author of important works, would express a more mature elaboration of his theories in the essay *Ḥiwār fī ‘l-masrah* (Dialogue about Theatre) which collects a series of articles written while he was teaching at the Institute of Dramatic Arts and published as a book in 1969.

The most interesting articles in this work, indispensable for a full understanding of the thought underpinning all of Surūr’s work for the stage, are without doubt *al-Ikhrāj fī Miṣr* (Direction in Egypt)²⁹ and *Ra’yī fī mawqifinā min al-klāsikiyyāt* (My Opinion on Our Attitude Towards the Classics),³⁰ in which he proposes an assessment of the state of Egyptian theatre in the light of the evolution of world theatre from ‘actor’s theatre’ to ‘playwright’s theatre’ and finally ‘producer’s theatre’.

In these articles Surūr reprimands Egyptian theatre for being bound to the primary role of the actor as principal element of the production, while world theatre had been moving, over time, towards a theatrical form that privileged direction. As far as the relationship with European theatre was concerned, Surūr maintained that

our theatre is still in an early stage of its re-birth and, consequently, we need to beware of borrowing everything recently produced by European theatre. This does not mean that we have to pretend ignorance of the latest important developments: on the contrary, we must make use of these, applying them to our own theatrical needs, in such a way that they become one of the many phases of our own development.³¹

The Egyptian dramatist’s position appears, then, reasonably balanced and, ultimately, his main concern seems to be simply the creation of a high-quality theatre that reflects the both the artistic and the social needs of the contemporary Egyptian situation. The tone of Surūr’s argument becomes decidedly sharper when he pits himself against what were at the time the authoritative voices of Egyptian theatre.

In the collection of short texts published in 1977 under the title *Hākadhā qāla Juḥā* (Thus spoke Juḥā), Surūr goes further, taking aim at Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm and Yūsuf Idrīs, defining their attempts as the expression of, on the one hand, a fanatical nationalism and, on the other, a deep-seated inferiority-complex in relation to the West. Surūr goes as far as

28 Ibid.: m.

29 Surūr, “al-Ikhrāj fī Miṣr”, in: id. 1969: 40-50.

30 Surūr, “Ra’yī fī mawqifinā min al-klāsikiyyāt”, in: Surūr 1969: 51-59.

31 Surūr 1969: 45.

to say that the origin of the decadence of the Egyptian theatre coincides with the publication of critical texts written by the two father-figures of Egyptian theatre in the mid-1960s.³²

Among the motivating factors for Surūr's antagonistic position was the personal and professional persecution that he had suffered at the hands of the dominant cultural elite of his time. Among his detractors Rashād Rushdī, whose career in the official cultural associations and as director of *al-Masrah* review effectively ran parallel to Surūr's lifetime. For many years *al-Masrah* did not take into consideration any of Surūr's theatrical activity. For instance, the number 19/1965 of the review announced that the play *Yāsīn wa-Bahiyyah* would be published in the following issue of the magazine. But, in the end, Rushdī decided to publish in its place the translation of a French drama, and this decision deeply wounded Surūr.³³

In *Hākadhā qāla Juḥā*, Surūr accuses Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, as well as Rashād Rushdī, of being "strangers to the people". According to Surūr,

[t]hey wear popular masks when they choose a subject or look for a dramatic solution. When Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm and Rashād Rushdī write about peasants, they do it in order to stab them in the back. They write about workers in order to undermine the working class. They write about dramatic creation, and at the same time hang the authors. They write about revolution in order to make counter-revolution.³⁴

In the light of his theories, it is interesting to note that, despite the fact that "the most essential part of Surūr's own published output has been his use of folk themes",³⁵ his objective was to create an avant-garde radical theatre, which made no claim to "authenticity". Even though the sources of Surūr's drama are Ibn Danyāl, the popular Egyptian songs, the *mawwāl*, and al-Ma'arrī poems,³⁶ he intended to make not a folklore-based theatre, but an innovative theatre which could address the immediate concerns of a neglected part of his society and his nation.

Surūr's experience in creating theatre

It is often forgotten that Surūr worked in theatrical contexts such as the Pocket Theatre, or *Masrah al-jayb*, the name of a small theatre building situated in the Zamalek district in Cairo. The pioneers of this project included artists who had studied in Europe and then imported into their own world the works and experimental and avant-garde techniques that they had learnt abroad. Among these was the actor and director Sa'd Ardash who, on returning to Egypt after studying at the Academy of Dramatic Arts in Rome, persuaded the

32 Drama critic Mahmoud el-Lozy affirms that those texts have had "the most disastrous consequences on the Egyptian theatre". Cf. El-Lozy 1998.

33 'Abd al-Ḥamīd (ed.) 1978: 164.

34 Surūr [1981]: 58.

35 Cachia 2000: 195.

36 On the use of elements such as songs, proverbs and popular mythology in Surūr's theatre, cf. Abū 'l-'Ulā 1989 and 'Īd 1990.

then Minister of Culture, Tharwat ‘Ukāshah, to finance his project, becoming, until 1964, its artistic director.

In particular, the artists who worked in the workshop of the Pocket Theatre, turned their attention to the Theatre of the Absurd. The theatre’s opening production in 1962 was Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*, directed by Ardash himself, to be followed by *Les chaises* by Ionesco under the direction of Muḥammad ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, along with works by Brecht, Lorca, and Japanese, German and Italian writers.

As we have already seen, the Pocket Theatre also saw Surūr make his debut, in its 1964-65 season, with his adaptation of Chekhov’s *Cherry Orchard* and in the same theatre, Karam Miṭāwi’, who had meanwhile taken over its management, was to produce *Yāsīn wa-Bahiyyah*.

In this play, as is widely known, Surūr used the template of an old folk tale to depict a peasant revolt that had been harshly repressed a few years before the 1952 revolution in Upper Egypt. Surūr set his story in Buhūt, a real village in the Nile Delta, like his native Akhtāb. The original tale—in ballad form—tells the story of the ill-fated love between the two protagonists and ends with the protagonist shot in the back by the jealous *Pasha*. In Surūr’s play, Yāsīn is the revolutionary hero who inflames the peasants to rise against the landowners: he will die during the fight, while Bahiyyah, one of the most interesting female characters created for the Arab scene,³⁷ is the symbol of Egypt.

The play generated, at the same time, interest, enthusiasm and scepticism, and Surūr gained unexpected notoriety. *Yāsīn wa-Bahiyyah*, despite extensive use of elements belonging to popular Egyptian tradition, represented “a formal experiment in developing a new type of ‘popular’ Egyptian drama which consciously departs from the European model and its conventions”.³⁸ Many critics at the time, however didn’t find the work consistent with the Pocket Theatre’s experimental project. The author himself responded to these criticisms by affirming that this work “was not written for the theatre, [...] it isn’t a play, but rather a ‘verse novel’ (*riwāyah shi’riyyah*), that is, a novel adapted for the theatre, in the manner of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*.”³⁹

As far as the technical aspects of Surūr’s theatre are concerned, he has often employed the figure of the popular narrator who, accompanied by the *rabābah*, introduces the tale. As in the opening of *Yāsīn wa-Bahiyyah*:

I tell the story of Bahūt
The story of Yāsīn and Bahiyyah
I tell it for the men,
the women and the old ones
I tell it for the young and the children,
I tell it for the generations,
for history,
and those who make history... the peoples
I tell it for the workers and the peasants

37 al-Rā’ī 1975: 169.

38 Selaiha 2007.

39 Surūr, “Ḥawla ‘l-tajrībiyyah!”, in id. 1969: 62-63.

the naked and the hungry
I tell it for those who work hard under the sun
the revolutionaries of all countries.⁴⁰

This very element of the narrator, a figure taken up by many of the era's Arabic playwrights, probably made it easier to label Surūr's theatre as "popular". But this figure could conversely be associated with the narrator or commentator used by Bertolt Brecht, who serves as an intermediary between audience and characters.

In Surūr's case, here—as in other works—the narrator also communicates directly with the chorus, an even more important element that the Egyptian dramatist borrowed from world theatre.

Indeed, in his plays Surūr restores the role of the chorus used to link one event to the other. In the trilogy the chorus is personified by the people of Bahūt, who speak in response to the *rāwī*. This element had been restored to the twentieth-century theatre by such dramatists as Lorca, Brecht etc., whose drama was well known to the public of the Pocket Theatre.⁴¹ Surūr used this element knowingly as evidenced by the long essay "Difā' 'an al-kūrūs: istintājāt jadīdah min ḥaqā'iq qadīmah" in *Ḥiwār fi 'l-masrah* which shows his mature reflection, inspired by recent examples from European theatre, on this dramatic feature.⁴²

Successively, Surūr continues his Bahiyyah / Egypt allegory in *Āh yā layl yā qamar* (1966), performed at al-Ḥakīm Theatre, and directed by Jalāl al-Sharqāwī, and in *Yā Bahiyyah wa-khabbirīnī* (1967), in which he depicts the decline of the socialist ideology. Immediately after these works Surūr wrote a little-known text that on the one hand brought him back to the experimentation carried out in the context of the Pocket Theatre, and on the other allowed him to continue working with the settings he was familiar with. *Alū yā Miṣr*, written in 1968, immediately after the trilogy that had made him famous, was unpublished until 1998, when it was included in the journal *Āfāq al-masrah* on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of Surūr's death.⁴³

Surūr wrote this work for the Tahia Carioca (Taḥiyyah Kāryūkā) theatre company, and then gave the manuscript to Fāyẓ Ḥalāwah at the end of 1969. The Egyptian artist would ultimately decide not to produce the play because of the lack of an appropriate role for her, and the text was lost until Surūr's widow re-discovered a copy containing many corrections, with whole scenes deleted, and character names changed.⁴⁴

In this work, still written in 'āmmiyyah, but this time in prose, there is strong evidence of the influence that Russian theatre had had on Surūr's writing, particularly the work of Chekhov, whose example seems to have inspired the Egyptian playwright's dramatic structure.

In *Alū yā Miṣr*, the action takes place in the village of Akhtāb at the time of the British protectorate, and, more specifically, during the years of the First World War. From a formal point of view, there seems to be no single central figure, the real protagonist being the village, as a collective whole, in which the dramatic action is set. The drama takes place ex-

40 Surūr, *Yāsīn wa-Bahiyyah*, al-Qāhirah: Maktabat Madbūlī, undated [1965]: 8-9.

41 Rubin (ed.) 1999: 80.

42 Surūr, "Difā' 'an al-kūrūs: Istintājāt jadīdah min ḥaqā'iq qadīmah," in id. 1969: 137-93.

43 Surūr 1998: 4-57.

44 Cf. the presentation by Abū 'l-'Ulā to *Alū yā Miṣr*, in Surūr 1998: 4-5.

clusively in public places, such as the telegraph office, the mortuary, the cafe. Among the characters are ‘Abbās effendi, the telegraph office worker sent to Akhtāb by his superiors as a punishment, who complains of the tragic condition in which Egyptian society finds itself, and of the corruption spreading out from the administrative apparatus; then there is the garrulous Wahībah, whose son ‘Aṭīyyah has been taken by the state, to be sent to fight with the English against the Germans; then again the ‘*umdah*—the mayor; the young Shalibah who is in search of an advantageous marriage; the *shaykh* of the village; the peasants. Each character tells his or her own tragedy, be it large or small, such as the story of al-Sa’danī, the village idiot, who recounts his misadventures on the occasion of a trip to the capital. All think of the past with nostalgic regret, even though this was a past in which hundreds of lives were claimed by the cholera that ravaged the village. The action, lost within the maze of discursive prose, seems to centre around waiting, from the opening, when news of ‘Aṭīyyah is awaited, until the end when the characters await the return of the corpse of the ‘*umdah*’s son. The characters seem powerless to influence their future, and live in hope that the world will change of its own accord to free them from the despotic power that oppresses them. The work effectively represents, ultimately, the climate that enveloped Egypt after 1967, when the citizens felt completely powerless to act.

These are characters typical of Chekovian drama: from the suppression of the hero for the benefit of the group—a chorus devoid of a centre, where each character nevertheless maintains his or her own individual identity—to the characters’ failure to act, as their will “breaks in the face of action and retreats, defeated,” to the quest for social justice.

To these examples can be added subsequent works such as *al-Ḥukm qabla ‘l-mudāwalah*, written between 1967 and 1969 about the relationship between citizens and institutions, especially those concerned with national security and the administration of justice, represented here by police officers and judges.⁴⁵ In this three-act drama, which fits perfectly into the movement of the Theatre of the Absurd, Surūr once again constructs the action starting from the chorus. Indeed, it is this very chorus that signals the beginning and the end of each act.

One could continue with other works in which Surūr shows a perfect mastery of Western dramatic techniques, placing them in an undeniably Egyptian social and cultural context, while at the same time categorically refusing to be labelled “authentic”. By establishing a complex of “palimpsestuous relations”,⁴⁶ that is, making Brecht rub shoulders with traditional poetry and Chekhov with folk wisdom. Surūr succeeded in creating a truly avant-garde theatre, which rejects “social institutions and established artistic conventions”,⁴⁷ a theatre that transmits a clear political message⁴⁸ and, more importantly, that can speak to the people.

45 The work was rejected by the censorship commission of the National Theatre (al-Masrah al-qawmī), cf. Abū ‘l-‘Ulā’s preface to Surūr’s collected works, Surūr 1993: 9.

46 The adjective was coined by Philippe Lejeune, even if a deeper elaboration of the term can be found in Genette 1981. About intertextual and palimpsestuous relations in drama literature cf. Kiebuszinska 2001: 21 et seq.

47 Innes 1993: 1.

48 Shalabī 1992 and Maḥmūd 2001.

Bibliography

Works by Najīb Surūr

- (1958): *Shajarat al-Zaytūn* (Olive Tree)
- (1963-64): *Yāsīn wa-Bahīyyah* (Yāsīn and Bahīyyah)
- (1966): *Āh yā layl yā qamar* (Oh Night, Oh Moon)
- (1967): *Yā Bahīyyah wa-khabbīrīmī* (Tell me, Bahia)
- (1967-69): *al-Ḥukm qabla 'l-mudāwalah* (Judgment before Deliberation)
- (1968): *Alū yā Miṣr* (Hello Egypt)
- (1968): *Mirāmār* (dramatization of Najīb Maḥfūz's novel).
- (1969): *al-Bayraq al-abyaḍ* (The White Banner)
- (1969): *al-Kalimāt al-mutaqāṭī'ah* (Crossword Puzzles)
- (1971): *al-Dhubāb al-azraq* (The Blue Flies)
- (1971): *Malik al-shahhātīn* (King of the Beggars; adaptation of Brecht's *The Three Penny Opera*)
- (1973): *Qūlū li-'ēn el-shams* (Tell the Eye of the Sun)
- (1974): *al-Najmah umm dhayl* (The Comet)
- (1974): *Minēn ajīb nās li-ma'nat il-kalām yiqūlūh* (Where Can I Find People Who Can Spell Out the Meaning of Words)
- (1977): *Afkār junūniyyah fī daftar Hamlet* (Mad Thoughts in Hamlet's Notebook; adaptation of *Hamlet*).
- (1993): *al-A'māl al-kāmilah*, vol. 2. Al-Hay'ah al-miṣriyyah al-'āmmah li'l-kitāb, al-Qāhirah.

References

- ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, Bandar (1978): "Najīb Surūr: Mawt al-muḡannī al-muqātil." *al-Ḥayāt al-masraḥiyyah*, 6 (kharīf 1978): 4, 161-171.
- Abū 'l-'Ulā, 'Iṣām al-Dīn (1989): *Masraḥ Najīb Surūr*. Maktabat Madbūlī, al-Qāhirah.
- Allen, Roger (2007): *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Amine, Khalid / Carlson, Marvin A. (2008): "al-Halqa in Arabic Theatre: an Emerging Site of Hybridity". *Theatre Journal*, 60/1: 71-85.
- ʿAṭiyyah, Ḥasan (1990): *al-Thābit wa'l-mutaḡhayyir fī 'l-masraḥ wa'l-turāth al-sha'bī*. al-Hay'ah al-miṣriyyah al-'āmmah li'l-kitāb, al-Qāhirah.
- Burt, Clarissa (2001): "The Tears of a Clown: Yusuf Idris and Postrevolutionary Egyptian Theatre". In: Zuhur (ed.) 2001: 39-76.
- Cachia, Pierre (2000): "Folk Themes in the Works of Najīb Surūr". *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures*, 3/2 (2000): 195-204.
- Carlson, Marvin A. (2006): "Avant-Garde Drama in the Middle East". In: Harding/Rouse (eds.) 2006: 125-44.
- Crabbs, Jack, Jr. (1975): "Politics, History, and Culture in Nasser's Egypt". *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 6/4: 386-420.
- El-Lozy, Mahmoud (1998): "Rebel with a Cause". *al-Ahram Weekly On-line*, no. 400 (22-28 October 1998), <<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/1998/400/cu5.htm>> (accessed 18Jun2010).
- Genette, Gérard (1981): *Palimpsestes: la littérature au second degré*. Seuil, Paris.
- al-Ḥakīm, Tawfīq [1962]: *Yā ṭālī' al-shajarah*. Maktabat al-Ādāb, Al-Qāhirah. – Translated into Italian as "*O tu che sali sull'albero...*" by Adalgisa De Simone, Roma & Palermo: Istituto per l'Oriente-Università di Palermo, 1971.
- (1967): *Qālibunā al-masraḥī*. Maktabat al-Ādāb, Al-Qāhirah.
- Harding, James Martin / Rouse, John (eds., 2006): *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.

- Harding, James Martin / Rosenthal, Cindy (2006): *Restaging the Sixties: Radical Theaters and their Legacy*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.
- ʿĪd, Muḥammad al-Sayyid (1990): *al-Turāth fī masraḥ Najīb Surūr*. Al-Hayʾah al-Miṣriyyah al-ʿĀmmah liʾl-Kitāb, al-Qāhirah.
- (1993): Preface to *Surūr* 1993.
- Idrīs, Yūsuf (1974): *Naḥwa masraḥ miṣrī: maʿa ʾl-nuṣūṣ al-kāmilah liʾl-masraḥiyyāt*. al-Waṭan al-ʿArabī, al-Ribāt.
- Innes, Christopher D. (1993): *Avant-Garde Theatre, 1892-1992*. 2nd ed. Routledge, London & New York.
- Khaznadar, Chérif / Deák, Norma Jean (1973): “Tendencies and Prospects for Third World Theatre”. *The Drama Review*, 17/4 (Dec., International Festival Issue): 33-50.
- Kiebuszinska, Christine Olga (2001): *Intertextual Loops in Modern Drama*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison NJ.
- Maḥmūd, ʿIzz al-Dīn (2001): *Masraḥ al-thawrah waʾl-tajrib ʿinda Najīb Surūr wa-Amīrī Barakah*. Fuṣṣilat liʾl-dirāsāt waʾl-tarjamah waʾl-nashr, Ḥalab.
- Ostle, R. C. (ed., 1975): *Studies in Modern Arabic Literature*. School of Oriental and African Studies, London.
- al-Rāʿī, ʿAlī (1975): “Some Aspects of Modern Arabic Drama”. In: Ostle (ed.) 1975: 167-178.
- Rubin, Don (ed., 1999): *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, vol. 4: *The Arab World*. Taylor and Francis, London.
- Selaiha, Nehad (2007): “Remembering Naguib Sorour.” *al-Ahram Weekly On-line*, no. 840 (12-18 April 2007). <<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2007/840/cu11.htm>> (accessed 10Oct2009).
- Shalabī, Khayrī (1992): *Najīb Surūr... masraḥ al-azmah*. al-Hayʾah al-Miṣriyyah al-ʿĀmmah liʾl-Kitāb, al-Qāhirah.
- Surūr, Najīb (1957): “Takhṭīṭāt fī ʾl-masraḥ al-miṣrī”. *al-Ādāb*, 5/1: ḡ-m.
- (1969): *Ḥiwār fī ʾl-masraḥ*. Maktabat al-Anglū al-Miṣriyyah, al-Qāhirah.
- (n.d.) [1981]: *Hākadhā qāla Juḥā*. Dār al-Thaqāfah al-Jadīdah, al-Qāhirah.
- (1998): “Alū yā Miṣr”. *Āfāq al-masraḥ*, 8: 4-57.
- Zuhur, Sherifa (ed., 2001): *Colors of Enchantment: Theater, Dance, Music, and the Visual Arts of the Middle East*. American University in Cairo Press, Cairo.