Postscript on Laila Soliman's Revolutionary Theatre

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Laila Soliman's prophetic words in *Lessons in Revolting*, "this revolution is far from over" (2011) have come to fruition.[1] The ouster of former President Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government by a military takeover on 3 July 2013 (after only one year in power) has added another chapter to the uprising's trajectory. While the revolution inspired dramatic protest and equally spectacular creative expression in the form of experimental theatre, music, art, spoken word, and other forms, many Egyptian artistes and cultural critics have bemoaned a general stymying of artistic synergies at the state level due to a series of interconnected factors. They have attributed this attrition to "budget limitations, recurring safety problems, the so-called 'religious eye' that defied Egypt's cultural identity—particularly during the year when power was in the hands of the former president Mohamed Mursi—and a cabinet filled with either the Islamist factions or their sympathizers" (Metwaly 2013).

The frequent cancellation of major productions at the Cairo Opera House (situated in close proximity to Tahrir Square) due to demonstrations, roadblocks, government intervention, protests, and boycotts has compromised the positioning of a viable national cultural scene. At the same time, the situation has led to a major ideological shift in the mindset of Egypt's nationally recognized *artistes*. As stated by Metwaly: "Looking back at the past two and a half years, one cannot overlook a noteworthy achievement: an ideological transformation in Egypt's artists, many of whom have come to realize that culture and creativity should not be considered a mere luxury—that it is, in fact, a fundamental part of life for people from all social strata" (Metwaly). This shift in perspective from a bourgeois art for art's sake ethos to a more popular re-visioning of culture and cultural politics resulted in large-scale artistic

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productions in public spaces, such the monthly *El-Fan Midan* celebrations in Cairo's Abdeen Square and other similar venues across the city. Started by a group of independent artists and cultural activists in April 2011, *El-Fan Midan* initially received the support of the Ministry of Culture. However, when state support began to wane after the first few months, the group had to rely on independent and organizational donations, according to Metwaly.

Fringe theatre, on the other hand, has always had to deal with economic setbacks in terms of funding and sponsorship, as well as spatial problems related to rehearsal and performance spaces. As stated by Dalia Basiouny, a professor of theatre and one of Egypt's most prominent independent playwrights:

> The lack of spaces has always been a challenge for theater groups in Egypt. Greater Cairo has more than 20 million inhabitants, but there are less than 16 theaters. Therefore, one of my main concerns has always been to identify alternative spaces that people could have access to" (El Nabawi 2013).

Like Soliman, Basiouny looks for "alternate" spaces in cafés, on university campuses, on the sidewalks of Cairo, small independent theatre spaces, and in other fringe locations. She agrees with Soliman and other independent playwrights and directors when they highlight the important role played by the documentary-style productions inspired by the revolution: "I do believe that documentary theater does have its role in this movement, mostly to cause reflection or action in the audience" (El Nabawi). Inspired by the experimental techniques of Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed," both Soliman and Basiouny use theatre as a medium of consciousness-raising, a tool to promote socio-political change through social justice-oriented issues related to gender, human rights, freedom of expression, and economic decolonization from elitist power structures. "There are no certainties in this life we are currently living in Egypt," states Basiouny. "All we know is that we are alive right now, and we can each do something with the skills and passions we hold. But at the end of the day, we are living a highly improvised life," she concludes (El Nabawi).

The highly improvised dimensions of living in times of political, social, and economic insecurity under a newly reinstated military regime finds prophetic expression once again in Soliman's most recent production, *Here, There and Everywhere/Hopes*, a forthcoming multimedia, multi-locational project that focuses on the symbolic, imaged, and physical representations of the state apparatus and its relationship to myth or reality. This play is based on a series of trans-locational dialogues and individual commentaries

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in Rabat, Cairo, and Berlin during different moments in history. Relying on active audience participation, as in her earlier productions, this piece uses different modes of narration and performative storytelling ranging from the "live" to the previously recorded, together with documentary footage and fiction. With its transnational focus, this production demonstrates how the abuse of power by the state apparatus is a universal predicament, just as revolt and revolution are universal responses and reactions to social and political oppression. Soliman "hopes" to keep the democratic ideals of the revolution alive through provocative, soul-searching and creative interventions that demand full engagement and total participation in the tenuous process of change. To be continued...

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End Note

[1]*Review of Middle East Studies*. Summer 2013. 47 (1): 54.

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