TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL RE-CONSTRUCTION THROUGH MEMORY: A POSTMODERNIST PERSPECTIVE IN ALFRED FARAG'S PLAY, AL-SHAKHS

Alfred Farag wrote Al-Shakhs (The Person) in 1989 to be performed at the Annual Experimental Theatre Festival in Cairo. It was the first play he wrote after a period of self-imposed silence and exile outside of Egypt. It is written in the Egyptian colloquial dialect, an unusual choice for him as he considers himself first and foremost an 'Arab' playwright addressing all of the Arab world and is therefore immensely partial to writing in classical Arabic. Al-Shakhs, however, seems to be a play strictly about Egypt and the Egyptians; its main character—merely called 'the Person'—represents the average Egyptian man, struggling with his mundane life and battling with mediocre ethical standards. Centre stage, he is lonely and alone, yet pathetically running from one throng to the next seeking basic services; his ambition is solely to accomplish small victories. The play is a battle between time and will, showing that the modern hero is one who can transcend and survive the rigidity of a valueless system. Structurally, the play consists of twelve independent scenes that seem to be pasted together rather than belonging with one another. Farag refers to it as “an experimental play in scenes.” Skeptics could interpret this subtitle either as an excuse for a bad play or a warning against some textual obscurity. Somehow, innovations in artistic productions usually develop a hesitant acceptance among spectators. However, when the artist is as prominent in his field as Alfred Farag is in drama, one ought to give him the benefit of the doubt when he presents a drama so foreign to his own style and so new to the genre as a whole.

Farag highly esteems the process of experimentation in art in general, counting it as the essence of generic transformation. In drama specifically he considers experimental performance to be vital for the development of theatre and condemns any attempt at stifling it. Although Farag holds experimental theatre in very high regard, he did not write any example of

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1 I have translated the play and called it The Person. It has not been published yet, therefore I will be referring to the page numbers of Arabic text of the play. All translations from the Arabic in this study are mine. I would like to thank Professor Roger Allen for his assistance and encouragement while I was translating the play and writing this study.

2 Alfred Farag, 'Dalil al-mutafarrij al-dhaki ilâ al-masrah,' in Mu'allafat Alfrid Faraj (Cairo, 1989), vol. 8, pp. 68-69.
that type (as other playwrights did) when it was *en vogue* in the sixties with the opening in Cairo of Al-Jayb Theatre to host avant-garde plays. His philosophy regarding artistic experimentation is clear when he proclaims that, “The nature of life is perpetual change. Since it is an expression of life, art must also undergo change of form and content, so as to keep up with the change (inherent in) life. . . . Change is the essence of freedom in art; it is this flexible capacity that makes art immortal.” From this pronouncement we may deduce that experimental theatre *per se* did not attract him until changes in the social, political and intellectual spheres of Egypt, and the Arab world, called for it. In writing *Al-Shakhs*, therefore, I suspect that Alfred Farag, who is known for his avid political commitment as a dramatist, was experimenting in order to find an innovative form through which to express a new agenda. He sought a freedom from the constraints of conventional performance art; as a result he had to destroy a considerable number of established rules to discover new approaches. It seems that he needed to challenge the genre he became known for, namely the ‘neo-realistic’ drama “which is based either on folk literature and historical events or deals directly with contemporary society.” The reason for this is not merely to be different, but to move beyond what is modern, to be in the vanguard of further innovations in theatre. For although he certainly does not endorse modernity in art as an end in itself, he is an advocate of necessary change. The question then is what is the nature of the experimental process presented to us by Farag in *Al-Shakhs*? And what makes the play experimental?

*The Plot*

The play is a journey between two very important events in anyone’s life: birth and marriage. However, they are not given particular emphasis; as a matter of fact, they seem almost peripheral. Instead all the emphasis is concentrated on the small insignificant incidents in a person’s life, the ones that are usually not worth depicting in art for their own sake: seeing a doctor, for instance, taking a bus, or going to the train station. Of course, each and every incident may be a turning point of great consequence in a person’s life if the author wishes to portray it as such, but Farag does not. He delves deeply into the mundane and into the absurdity at the heart of the mundane.

The play starts with the formation of a stage picture or collage. Char-

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