



Dina A. Amin. *Alfred Farag and Egyptian Theater: The Poetics of Disguise, With Four Short Plays and a Monologue.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008. xxx + 321 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-3163-7.

Reviewed by Bilal Maanaki (Indiana University)

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Commissioned by Amy A. Kallander (Syracuse University)

Pan-Arabism and After: The Evolution of a Playwright

This urgently needed book is an investigation of Egyptian theatre through the works of the preeminent Egyptian playwright Alfred Farag (1929-2005), during the turbulent period of the sixties and seventies, when Egyptian society was undergoing great political turmoil and drastic social change. Alfred Farag is regarded among the foremost Egyptian playwrights in the post-1952 revolution period. He played a major role in disseminating and popularizing theatrical performances across urban as well as rural Egypt. In addition to writing more than thirty plays in both classical and colloquial Arabic, Farag was also a theatre practitioner who was involved in theatrical troupe formations and unlike his contemporary Arab playwrights, he had a strong sense of the role of the stage in shaping all aspects of his drama, especially the characters's dialogues and monologues. Dina Amin takes a historiographic turn in her examination of Farag's works by focusing on the poetics of dramatic texts, especially his use of metadrama as a literary tool to disguise his commentary and criticism of both the Nasser and Sadat eras.

Amin's book is divided into three parts, not including an introduction and an appendix. The latter includes a chronological reference list of Farag's plays with the date and place of their productions, in addition to a small photo gallery of various performances. As attested in her introduction, the majority of works published on the playwright focus on his 1960s masterpieces, to the detri-

ment of his work during the 1970s even though this later period reflects Farag's artistic and literary maturity, and a different political and social span of time (albeit a pessimistic one). Amin's main objective is to provide a reading of Farag's plays of the seventies through focusing on his skillful use of metadrama (p. xxv).

Amin begins her analysis in chapter 1 with a biographical account of the playwright, his education, literary interests, his various governmental and non-governmental jobs, as well as a description of his political views regarding Arab politics in the sixties and seventies. She offers a detailed report on Farag's imprisonment under Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime and how this detention inspired his famous play *Hallaq Baghdad* (The Barber of Baghdad, 1964), which he wrote and performed in prison. Even though Farag's plays were not favored by the political regime of the time, the official attitude began to change after the declaration of the National Charter in 1962. Encouraging reconciliation between leftist intellectuals and artists and the government, many leftists and artists, including Farag, took high official positions in the Ministry of Culture. Besides Nasser, Amin examines Farag's life and work during the presidencies of Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak.

Chapter 2 focuses on Farag's artistic development. The author maintains that Farag's dramatic style was modernist and that his use of traditional motifs and folklore is comparable to the modernists's use of the mythi-

cal methodâ (p. 32). As a case study, Amin analyzes the dramatic language in some of his plays and highlights their modernist aspects. Chief among these are the playwrightâs use of colloquial and classical Arabic and his Brechtian method of direct communication with the audience.

Chapter 3, âMetadrama: The Poetics of Disguise,â is an exploration of the various Western descriptions of the nature and function of metadrama through the exposition of the major works written in this field. Amin explores concepts such as “self-conscious characters,” “self-conscious drama,” “varieties of metadrama,” “play-within-play,” and “role-playing” before turning to a discussion of Faragâs use of metadramatic devices. Here Amin offers examples from his plays *Baqbuq al-Kaslan* (Lazy Baqbuq, 1965) and *Al-Zir Salim* (1967) to support her argument that he used metadrama as a tool to disguise his criticism and avoid governmental censorship, what she labels the âpoetics of disguise.â

The second part of the book comprises three chapters and a conclusion. All of the chapters present an overview of the theatrical scenes in Egypt in the 1960s and 1970s where a number of Faragâs plays emphasize role-playing, dramatic self-consciousness, and play-within-a-play. Amin argues that in the 1960s, Farag used folklore and tradition to buttress his belief in the

shared cultural roots of all Arabs in order to push for Pan-Arabism. However, the playwright later âturned his attention from the Pan-Arabism of the 1960s to the Egyptian nationalism of the 1970s, focusing his work on the local scene in Egypt and on the changing situation of Egyptians under the new economic policies and political ideologyâ of Sadat (p. 193).

Part 3 offers a translation by Amin of four one-act plays and a one-woman monologue written by Farag. They are respectively, *Al-Ziyarah* (The Visitor, 1971), *Al-âAyn al-Sihriyyah* (The Peephole, 1977), *Al-Gharib* (The Stranger, 1975), *Daâirat al-Tibn al-Misriyyah* (The Egyptian Hay Circle, 1979), and *Al-Mishwar al-âAkhîr* (The Last Walk, 1998). Notably, these are the first translations of these materials into English and are a welcome addition to the ever increasing body of Arabic drama available in translation.

Through its focus on Arab drama and history, *Alfred Farag and Egyptian Theatre* contributes substantially to the growing field of Middle Eastern studies and can be a useful reference for students of drama as well as students of Arabic literature and history. Dina Amin has done a wonderful job in not only commenting on the nature of Egyptian theatre during the 1960s and 1970s but also in connecting this artistic field with society at large and the political context of that period.

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