The Pavements Don't Speak: Silencing Street Theatre in Egypt

Yasmin Helal
There are many losses. Some artists went to prison, many have fled the country, and some fell for depression, leaving a vacuum behind."

Such were the words that musician and lyricist Ayman Helmy chose to describe the current state of street theatre in Egypt. While the noise of Cairo’s hustle and bustle continues to rise, more street performers like him have been silenced.

Kept out of public spaces by heightened security measures, it is difficult to forecast clearly where street theatre is heading in light of the regime’s current crackdown on fundamental freedoms. According to Helmy, the future so far looks bleak.

Given the limited literature on street theatre, shedding light on this form of art is essential to understand the theatre industry in Egypt and to reflect on the politics of public spaces and how they are employed by the masses as a means of protest.

Through a series of interviews with artists, this paper will address the phenomenon of contemporary Egyptian street theatre, including the factors that enabled its rise and the purpose of some of the famous street performances. It will also discuss the process of politicization that the pioneering artists behind street theatre underwent, as well as the causes that led to the fall of street shows.

Breaking out of the establishment

The path of contemporary street theatre in Egypt was paved by many who had fought long and hard to have the potential of this form of art recognized. Founding members of the street theatre troupe *Hala*, including Helmy and Aly Sobhy, were part of a generation of artists in the late 1990s and early 2000s that had a growing desire to step outside of established cultural institutions. They belonged to a wave of disillusioned youth, fed up with the lack of opportunities and the limited freedom of expression, that emerged to contest an ageing and elitist generation that dominated the traditional theatre institutions and was reluctant to let go.

The art scene in which Helmy and Sobhy began their career as artists was already ripe with politically engaged youth, high audience participation in the street shows, and increased dissidence. Such factors were essential requirements to give birth to contemporary street theatre in the country.
These young artists did not set out to specialize in street shows. All they wanted was to perform somewhere, anywhere that was available. So they took to public spaces like parks and sidewalks to perform their shows and they soon became attached to the experience.

Speaking of his first street show which took place in 1998, another one of Hala’s founders Mohammed Abdel Fattah said, "I really liked having an audience that was surprised to find a show as they were walking by. They would then spontaneously stop to watch without being prepared."

For Sobhy, the magic of street shows was all about breaking the laws of theatre. This includes all the unspoken and formal norms that entering traditional theatres entails, in which the roles of the actors and the audience are rigid and predefined. The actors are limited to the stage and restricted by a set script, while the audience can only play a passive role, having to arrive and leave at certain times, remain seated on the same seats, and switch off their phones. None of this applies in the case of street theatre, where the actors and the audience play interchangeable roles; the limits of the former stretch as far and wide as the street allows, and the latter can have a say in how the performance unfolds.

"What drew me more to the idea was the level of freedom that the street provides from all these restrictions. Everything that happens is completely spontaneous. This entailed a high level of creativity, which was very important to me, especially that I had to create concepts that were relevant to the street and what was happening in it," Sobhy said.

**Reviving Egyptian theatre**

The driving force behind the success of Hala and street theatre was not only these young talents but also the numerous initiatives that believed in them. In the early 2000s, various events and venues sprung up to cater for and support an artistic movement that led to the revival of theatre in Egypt.

This revival has some of its roots in the 1980s that saw a significant rise in the number of independent theatre initiatives. With little material and logistical support from the government, independent theatre groups succeeded in offering
shows that played an important role in reinventing theatre in Egypt and “pedestrianized” concepts like freedom of speech and mobility, and in claiming back the street as a free public space for artistic expression. Critics believe that it was this wave that prevented the collapse of theatre in Egypt and laid the seeds for the revival that occurred in the 2000s.

"At the peak of this revival," recalls Helmy when speaking of the 1990s, "a discussion emerged regarding the very nature of independent theatre and whether it should be called autonomous theatre instead. Critics and intellectuals debated the terminology. A lot of efforts were carried out to reach a consensus and a conclusion regarding the meanings of these concepts." Both “autonomous” and “independent” continue to be used as terms to describe this new wave.

**Artivism meets political activism**

The movement that led to theatre revival in the 1980s and 1990s and eventually gave birth to troupes like *Hala* and *Atfal El Shaware’* (Street Children) was not entirely artistic. It happened during a period in Egyptian history when politics was in the air and groups like April 6th Youth and *Kefaya* (Enough) dominated downtown Cairo, regularly holding street protests and public debates. And just like their peers, young artists were also impacted by this politically charged environment, creating political movements that represented their grievances as artists. This includes the September 5th movement, founded and run by numerous artists, including *Hala*’s founding members.

"It was really a special movement that combined art with politics. This is how I got introduced to other offshoots of *Kefaya*, like Authors for Change and Artists for Change. There were a lot of movements in the early 2000s that adopted the word “change” in their name, like Doctors for Change and Lawyers for Change. Because I lived through this period, I quickly realized that something different was happening and that I was witnessing an important historical moment," Helmy said.

Named after the date of the Beni Suef theatre fire that occurred in 2005, the September 5th Movement aimed to raise awareness about those that lost their lives on that day. The fire was caused by a candle that fell backstage during one of
the shows of the Amateur Theatre Festival. The fact that such an event was held in
the underequipped Beni Suef Cultural Palace, located in one of the country’s
poorest provinces, was just one of the many problems that led to this unfortunate
tragedy. There were over 50 casualties in total, including cultural icons such as Dr
Saleh Saad, Hazem Shehata, Dr Mohsen Meselhy, and Bahaa El-Merghany. With
only one exit, no fire extinguishers, and virtually no staff on-site, the fire caused
panic and a stampede. A little too late, an underequipped firefighting squad
showed up, with an ambulance with badly trained staff arriving even later. With
over 70 injured on site, those who made it to the hospital were treated at
insufficiently equipped medical facilities first in Beni Suef and later in Cairo. In an
attempt to protest the various errors in the death certificates of the casualties,
family members showed up at the morgue but were attacked and beaten by police
officers. Of course, none of the failures of the state institutions was accurately
reflected in the media reports that were published later.

"This shocking event played a very important role in shaping my awareness and
consciousness, and I think this was also the case for many other artists," said
Helmy.

Reaching maturity

The evolution of street theatre in Egypt involved the development not just of the
performers but of the audience as well, a fact that could be seen in the 2011
uprisings. According to poet and long-time activist Zien el Abdin Fouad, what was
particularly amazing about the 2011 uprisings was the level of creativity of
individuals that had no artistic background. This turned Tahrir Square into an
open theatre stage that hosted various forms of creativity ranging from singing
and dancing to performing sarcastic monologues. "It was completely improvised
in the spur of the moment," said Fouad of protestors’ displays. These impromptu
performances often used state propaganda messages, twisting them in a way that
was similar to what street theatre troupes like Aftal El Shaware’ would do six years
later in 2017.

This surge in creativity might seem like a reason to fuel professional street shows,
but that was not the case. It had the contrary impact. This climate where everyone
was a street artist made it difficult for professional performers to find material for new shows, which partly explains how Hala’s street shows came to an end in 2010, shortly before the outbreak of the revolution, and never resumed.

“Sometimes the street outperforms the artist, which is what happened in 2011. We could not keep up with what the people were doing,” the troupe’s founder Abdelfattah said.

**Art in the square**

_Hala_ stopped offering street shows but the desire to continue occupying public spaces did not cease to exist. The experience encouraged many of the artists involved to continue offering street shows. With time, artists like Sobhy and Helmy took the concept and transformed it into something newer and bigger. This is evident in the development of artistic movements that gave birth to the street art festival El Fann Midan.

El Fann Midan combined several key ideas, including the contemporary street performances that _Hala_ introduced, the freedom of mobility and of public spaces that Tahrir Square provided, and older concepts like the traditional street festivals, _or Mawaled_, that were traditionally held to celebrate the birth or death of certain saints. After years of trying, the government succeeded in putting an end to these _Mawaled_, with just a couple left today in Cairo. Initially, the state started to sponsor initiatives in the 1970s that would offer a replacement that would be more easily controlled like the National Circus and the Folklore Dance troupe. Later in the 1990s, it launched a campaign to divide the open spaces required to hold these festivals. This was mainly done by building walls and banning the _Mawaled_ camps from setting up, which led to a sharp decline in their numbers. However, _Mawaled_ continued to live on in the public imaginary. They were often mentioned by many of the organizers of El Fann Midan as an example of events that enabled the masses to occupy public spaces.

El Fann Midan roughly translates to the art of the square, but “_midan_” has other meanings as well like platform, space, and sphere. It is this multiple meaning that the event’s organizers quite often emphasized during our discussions. Translating this into the public sphere is not quite right in the Cairene context, according to
urban historian Nezar AlSayyad.

"I don’t think this is really equivalent to the Habermasian public sphere, which has no accurate translation in Arabic. So, in a sense, I think the term ‘midan’ has always been the most appropriate one to use," he said.

According to him, the “midan” has more than one meaning. Combining the public sphere and the public space, some of its features include being public, communicative, and collective-oriented rather than individual.

"The ‘midan’ here is not a physical space, it’s a concept … that changed over time in the context of Egypt and particularly as manifested in Cairo," he explained. Some of the manifestations include previous protests like the 1919 revolution, but also funerals of public figures like late President Gamal Abdel Nasser and iconic singer Umm Kulthum, both of which passed through Midan Tahrir (Tahrir Square). "I think that the concept of the ‘midan’ was being born over time. And it took time to mature, both in the minds of the Egyptians and in their use of the physical space."

The first time that El Fann Midan took place was in April 2011, organized by artists and activists from diverse backgrounds. Holding it on Saturday in Abddeen Square, rather than Midan Tahrir, was deliberate so as not to create any conflict with or distractions from Tahrir’s usual Friday protests. At its peak, El Fann Midan, funded entirely by private donations, was held in more than 18 provinces, with over 150 participating artists and a live audience of about 4000 individuals. Some of the hosted activities included live shows, public debates, exhibitions, short film screenings, and book fairs. Not only did it provide accessible art to a large audience, it also led to encounters that some artists refer to as a turning point in their creative journey.

The organizers were faced with many hurdles, including lack of funding, but it was the introduction of 2014 Protest Law, which made it hard for such public events to get permission to perform, that brought the festival to its knees, ending it in 2014.

Street artists under attack
Despite the many obstacles imposed by Egyptian authorities after 2014, hope still lingered in the hearts of a few artists that they could still perform. It was not until 2016 and 2017 that the last of such hopes faded. This was around the same time that the satirist troupe *Atfal El Shaware’* went to jail for insulting the authorities, reflecting the extent of the regime's crackdown on the use of public spaces.

Initially, *Atfal El Shaware’* was formed by six students from the Jesuit Cultural Center with the aim to tour the country offering street shows. Mostly between 19 and 25 years old, these young and tech-savvy artists introduced a combination between the public and virtual spaces, recording their street performances and sharing them on social media. This, they figured, would allow their content to reach a wider audience. It was a simple idea that later proved to be very powerful and, according to expert analysis, the most dangerous thing a street artist can do in Egypt under the rule of Abdel Fattah El-Sissi.

"We are wanted the six of us … Five have fled but the youngest one among us, the one who has diabetes, has been arrested …" one of the troupe members posted on Twitter in May 2016. Charges held against them included inciting demonstrations and publishing online videos that insult state institutions. They were later arrested in May 2016 remained in pretrial detention for four months before they were sentenced to four years in jail; one of them was sentenced to two years in prison followed by two years on probation.

After their release, they started offering comedy shows on traditional theatre stages with no reference to politics.

### Street shows today

Looking back at the significant contributions of street performers, not much of their legacy is visible today. When it comes to these artists, there is little in their present reality that reflects the careers that they initially embarked on.

"Any form of an open public sphere is entirely absent. There is only one voice that is present today; it is that of the government. All these circumstances and more are heading towards only one result: that everything comes crashing down and that everything that emerged with the revolution dies," Helmy said.
It was a shift that neither he nor others like street performer Aly Sobhy could have predicted. When asked whether they still conduct street performances, the response is almost unanimous.

"Unfortunately, not. My last street show was in 2017. The problem is that there have been increasing restrictions in public spaces over the past four years because of the tightening of security measures. This, as well as other reasons, has forced us to stop our work in the street until we see how things go," Sobhy said.

When asked whether he knew anyone who is currently offering street shows, Helmy fell silent, trying to recall any name but to no avail. There are different reasons for this, he said. Funding sources interested in cultural activities have either dried up or shut down. Demoralized, the force that once pushed artists to launch personal initiatives is gone. But, he stressed, the biggest obstacle that restricted their mobility in public spaces is the introduction of Protest Law in 2014. Without having a protest permit, anyone can get arrested.

"You will find some artists locked up in jail for years for breaking this law. A minimum of one year and a maximum of four years. Just for being in the street, regardless of what they were doing," he said.

**Deep roots**

The government might have succeeded in silencing such initiatives by closing off public spaces, but that does not mean the end of street theatre in Egypt.

Poet Zin el Abdin Fouad believes that there is a strong sense of continuity that is essential to understanding the explosion of street art in Tahrir in 2011. None of it emerged from a vacuum, but rather it brought back some older traditions, like the previously mentioned *Mawaled*.

"'Chant louder, chant louder, those who chant will never die'. This chant, which I wrote when I was a student for a protest, was used in 1968 and was forgotten. And it was used again in the protests of 1972 and 1977 and forgotten. It re-emerged in the protests of the early 2000s with the *Kefaya* movement. Why? Because there were a few older activists who had memorized them from their youth when they
attended the protests of the 1960s and the 1970s. So there is an element of continuity," he said.

Despite the unpredictability of how the current crackdown will impact the future of street theatre, Sobhy thinks that it is highly unlikely that this form of art will cease to exist in Egypt. "I don't think that this will bring street theatre to an end whether here or anywhere else. This is a valuable form of artistic expression that has been evolving over the years. A long time ago, we used to have Hakawatis, the traditional storytellers who would move from café to café telling stories on the rhythm of the rababa. With time, this evolved to what became later known as Shadow Theater, and then the Aragoz puppet show emerged."

"The more they try to stifle street theatre, the stronger, more unpredictable, and more diverse it will reemerge and in a completely different form and style," he added.
About the author

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