Staging Tahrir: Laila Soliman's Revolutionary Theatre

Brinda Mehta
Mills College

> If one day, a people desire to live,
> Then fate will answer their call
> And their night will then begin to fade,
> And their chains break and fall.
>
> "Will to Live" Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābī[1]

One of the most inspiring aspects of the Egyptian revolution was the outpouring of creative expression that accompanied the uprising's social and political movements in the form of protest songs, poetry, slogans, chants, graffiti and installation art, street theatre, cartoons, among other forms of artistic inventiveness. Creative dissidence has always been an integral part of protest movements, as argued by Iraqi poet Sinan Antoon (2011):

> Poetry, novels and popular culture have chronicled and encapsulated the struggle of peoples against colonial rule and later, against postcolonial monarchies and dictatorships, so the poems, vignettes, and quotes from novels were all there in the collective unconscious.... The revolution introduced new songs, chants and tropes, but it refocused attention on an already existing, rich and living archive.... Contrary to all the brouhaha about Twitter and Facebook, what energized people in Tunisia and Egypt and elsewhere, aside from sociopolitical grievances and an accumulation of pain and anger, was a famous line of poetry by a Tunisian poet, al-Shabbi.

Antoon evokes Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābī, whose poem "The Will to Live," referenced in the epigraph, symbolized the battle cry of Tunisians in the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2151348100056329 Published online by Cambridge University Press

anti-colonial struggles of the early 1900s.[2] Refrains from the poem echoed in both Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab spring uprisings over one century later, thereby highlighting the intimate synergies between the creative imaginary and revolutionary action. However, Egypt's revolutionary spring was soon to morph into a tempestuous storm termed "*la tempête arabe*" (the Arab storm) by Lebanese author Evelyne Accad,[3] unleashing a whirlwind of mixed emotions and state violence on the one hand, and revolutionary artistic expression on the other.

Laila Soliman was among the ten million Tahrir Square protestors. She witnessed the unfolding of the revolution and its aftermath first-hand and was therefore in a position to "stage" the different phases of the revolution and its consequences. Theatre provides her with the expressive outlet to indict the militarization of the Egyptian state on the one hand, and to highlight the predominance of the prison complex that creates a culture of fear, abuse, and intimidation on the other. At the same time, her plays also demonstrate the ways in which these violations are countered by the people's spirit of resistance that takes several forms ranging from testimonial exposure to dissident art and public protest. The open-ended structure of experimental theatre gives Soliman the freedom to work with a variety of theatrical forms instead of limiting her to a singular genre of performance. Her theatre situates itself within the interstices, in an indeterminate "interspace" during and after the uprisings, a space that guards its autonomy without being inhibited by a limiting time line.

Laila Soliman is an avant-garde Egyptian playwright, director and theatre coach who uses the power of revolutionary theatre to channel social unrest and public protest into an open forum of dissent. As one of Egypt's most outspoken and revolutionary young *artistes*, she uses the medium of experimental theatre to make important social justice interventions. For Soliman, theatre represents an expression of dissident creativity in its capacity to "out" anomie and create the necessary spaces for revolutionary mediums of expression. Theatre has also provided women dramatists like Soliman with the opportunity to raise social consciousness and political awareness during the revolutionary struggles of the Arab Spring by inscribing their gender-specific concerns. These issues are related to violence against women, sexual disempowerment, spatial segregations, youth disenfranchisement, political repression, and social pathology.

Born in Cairo in 1981, Soliman has been deeply committed to independent fringe theater since her most formative years in the Egyptian capital. She believes in the role of dissident art as a tool of social and personal empowerment since it articulates modes of expression that are otherwise negated or stifled. She received her training at the German School and the

American University in Cairo and is currently completing her Master's in Theatre at DasArts in Amsterdam. She is the author of numerous plays that are showcased in Egypt, Europe, Latin America, and the United States. These productions include *The Retreating World* (2004), *Ghorba, Images of Alienation* (2006), *At Your Service* (2009), *Lessons in Revolting*, *Blue Bra Day*, and an ongoing five-part series of interactive collaborative pieces titled *No Time for Art* (2013).[4] The last three plays have been inspired directly by the 2011 uprising. A winner of the Willy Brandt Special Award for Political Courage in October 2011, Soliman reaffirms her commitment to use theater as a forum for social critique, political contestation, and human rights issues.

Soliman's plays are inscribed within a certain narrative of violence. Her work highlights the violence that accompanies the excision of a society's feminine and creative imaginary by dramatizing the traumas that result from these exclusions. At the same time, her plays stage their appeal for an inclusive dissident consciousness that includes the participation of women as the key to a successful decolonization from the patriarchal stranglehold of coloniality. Soliman explores the "dangerous" role of women's theatre in its capacity to mobilize public opinion against the specific historical, political, and psychological violations that compromise human integrity in the Arab world. She highlights the role of theatre in exposing human rights violations to determine whether the aggressed can be given voice and visibility in a public text. By inscribing her artistic presence in a visibly public space, Soliman disrupts gender-determined spatial framings of inner (private) and outer (public) space. She also uses different dramatic forms ranging from classical Greek to Artaud's "theatre of cruelty," first-person "testimonial theatre" to Brechtian experimentalism in order to highlight the diversity and complexity of her narrative styles. As a particular "narration to the moment," testimonial theatre is a particularly effective public staging of personal eyewitness accounts of an actual event, such as the Egyptian uprisings.

Laila Soliman's play *No Time for Art* stages the darker side of the Egyptian revolution as demonstrated by the incarceration and torture of creative dissidents at the hands of a powerful military junta. The dramatist uses the form of testimonial theatre, in which first person narratives chronicle and document the abuses suffered by young revolutionaries in their dramatic confrontation of a militarized state. The Egyptian state had maintained the people in a vise-like grip during the thirty-year rule of former President Hosni Mubarak. The revolution that began on 25 January 2011 was inspired by a series of interrelated events: the Tunisian revolution, a long history of organized political activism, the spectacular display of cyber activism, and the people's rallying cry against a thirty year-old dictatorship that had denied them basic

civil rights under a regime of military authoritarianism. Like Tunisia, Egypt ignited its own spark against longstanding civilian violations that included police brutality, rampant corruption, censorship, state of emergency laws, denial of free and fair elections, high unemployment rates, food shortages, gender inequality, poverty, and rising inflation indexes. A coalition of workers, students, housewives, journalists, activists, artistes, children, and intellectuals synchronized the downfall of the powerful head of state in eighteen days.[5]

In Soliman's multimedia performances, docudramas intersect with testimonial theatre; social media networks are integrated into narrative structures; smart phones and televisions counteract silences, pauses, and the performance of oral history in a symbiotic fusion of postmodern technology and expressive dramaturgy. It is therefore difficult to analyze her plays traditionally in terms of theme, characterization, and plot structure. The stream-of-consciousness flow that underlines certain aspects of her work defies analysis and methodological probing. The absence of structure and the outpouring of words highlight a sense of urgency. The need to speak and denounce in free form takes precedence over aesthetics to provide a "spoken word" narrative unmediated by the studied crafting of words and syntax. The cause of exposing human rights abuses is embraced by a diverse community of artistes and activists who are celebrated and commemorated in a work such as *No Time for Art*. As the Cairo-based graffiti artist and designer Ganzeer remarks:

> Dirty politics and power struggles aside, there are innocent people who died over the course of Egypt's current revolution. These people died because they could see something most of us could not see. They died because they could see Egypt soaring high in a place of dignity and respect. They could see Egypt become something none of us thought possible.... True heroes, ready to fight a corrupt regime with all its soldiers, guns, and ammo with nothing more than their voices and will power (Davis: 1).

Performances like *No Time for Art* resurrect these silenced voices that refuse be lost in vain.

It is important to note that most of Soliman's performances in Cairo take place in off-centered, non-mainstream spaces, such as university campuses and the fringe Rawabet Theatre in downtown Cairo. These stagings are meant to energize marginal spaces with the vitality of revolutionary art, and to offer alternative spaces for Cairo's vibrant counter culture spearheaded by a new generation of creative dissidents. Soliman politicizes the private space of fringe theatre on the one hand, but on the other, she outs the private into public space by the wide recognition she receives for her work in Egypt and abroad. As an

independent artiste, she is thus liberated from the limitations of corporate sponsorship rules in terms of subject matter, location, and production, and can thereby explode myths, taboos, and state secrets through the medium of live performance. At the same time, there is nothing glorious about her performances. Instead, their introverted quality creates a reflective space of consciousness-raising in the form of protest and resistance.

Soliman offers raw, unornamented, and bare-to-the-bones documentation of the heavy "price" of revolution represented by the arbitrary incarceration, punishment, and torture of dissidents termed "thugs" by the government, as mentioned earlier. Her plays lead us into the darkness of the government's counter revolutionary tactics aimed at stifling opposition and eliminating any form of "subversion" to army rule. Soliman's perspective is crucial to our understanding of the uprising because it represents the point of view of a younger generation of Egyptians who feel that their futures are being compromised by a patriarchal tug-of-war between the army and religious factions. Soliman's use of a multidimensional theatrical experience provides an alternative version of history through counter narrations, uncensored scripting found in blogging, texting and other forms of technology, audience participation, minimalism, and the personalized testimonials of living actor-activists who blur the boundaries between reality and acting in a *théâtre-vérité* performance. This theater "of the human" is a way to commemorate both the victims and survivors of the uprisings and decriminalize their negative portrayals in governmental "scripts" that resort to a powerful "media play" of distortion, manipulation, and fabrication.

Soliman's theatre stages the dramatic confrontations between military men, dissenting women, and creative dissidents in a dysfunctional power differential. Such imbalances leave no space for dialogue or artistic/creative negotiations, hence the title of the series, *No Time for Art*. The title's ambiguity is symptomatic of the playwright's own mediations on the place and function of art and artistic freedom in a militarized state of siege. At the same time, Soliman has been particularly sensitive to the violence against women during the uprisings. Her feminist play, *Blue Bra Day*, represents a powerful cry against the military's cruelty against female protestors, who suffer the same abuse and indignities as political and intellectual dissenters. The army's misogynist attitude is exemplified by its brutal treatment of an anonymous woman wearing a blue bra. The young woman is pummeled with blows, beaten, and stomped on with heavy military boots. As she is dragged through Tahrir Square, her clothes and *abaya* (body veil) are ripped apart, exposing a bare torso adorned by the vividly colored bra. This moment of infamy has been captured for posterity on video, camera, smart phone, and TV as proof of a

crime committed by a cohort of soldiers against a defenseless woman. Soliman was one of the protestors who joined a large woman's march protesting the treatment of the blue bra woman and other violated women like her. Inspired by the event, *Blue Bra Day* gives form and presence to the woman's story ensuring that her ordeal will not be erased from the revolution's memory. In this play, Laila the actor merges with Laila the activist to demonstrate how Laila's artistic dissidence on stage complements her dissident activism in daily life. The play is a testament to the resilience and courage of Egyptian women who continue to demonstrate in Tahrir Square despite the setbacks they have faced in the post-Tahrir period. The women realize they have everything to lose in the future through disengagement, cynicism, and pessimism.

"This revolution is far from over," states Soliman in *Lessons in Revolting*. Her plays and her creative activism dramatize the ideals of Egypt's aggressed men, women, and children who demonstrate daily in Tahrir Square with the hope of reclaiming their compromised nation. As an impassioned cultural activist, Soliman politicizes her art in the name of social justice to offer dissident narratives of hope and critique, an alternative to the government's mediated reporting of the uprisings. Her work thereby creates important synergies between revolutionary thought and creative action. This collusion represents a war cry against the repressive ideologies of a government that violates the democratic ideals of its people.

Works Cited

Antoon, Sinan. 2011. "Literature and the Arab Spring: Interview with Sinan Antoon," *Jadaliyya Reports*, May 25, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1680/kenyon-review-interview-with-sinan-antoon-on-liter. Accessed 30 June 2012.

Davis, Ben. 2011. "They Died to See Egypt Soar: A Cairo Artist's Portraits of the Revolution's Martyred Activists." *BlouinArtinfo*, February 11. Online publication.

Khalil, Ashraf. 2012. *Liberation Square: Inside the Egyptian Revolution and the Rebirth of A Nation*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Soliman, Laila. 2011. "No Time for Art" (Unpublished script). Personal communication with author. http://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=azR6peyDJzo.

_____. 2011. "Blue Bra Day," (Unpublished script). Personal communication with author.

_____. 2013. "Laila Soliman: Bio." http://www.blogger.com/profile/03121952168388692897. Accessed 15 May 2013.

_____. 2013. "Laila Soliman: No Time for Art." http://www.aspaceforliveart.org/?page=events&id=1908. Accessed 15 May 2013.

Soueif, Ahdaf. 2012. *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

End Notes

[1]Translation by Elliott Colla, included in "Three Translations of Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi's 'If the People Wanted Life One Day'," *Arabic Literature* (in English), online at http://arablit.wordpress.com/2011/01/16/two-translations-of-abu-al-qasim-al-shabis-if-the-people-wanted-life-one-day/, accessed 16 June 2013.

[2]Refer to http://aasilahmad.net/abu-al-qasim-al-shabi-the-poet-of-the-tunisia-and-egyptian-revolution/, accessed 18 August 2012.

[3]"Voix de femmes, voix de luttes dans les printemps (tempêtes) arabes. Unpublished paper. Summer 2012.

[4]For more information check http://www.kent.ac.uk/art/pdfs/CREATIVEPRACTICESinfo.pdf. Accessed 1 July 2012.

[5]Egyptian novelist and cultural critic Ahdaf Soueif chronicles the first eighteen days of the revolution in her memoir, *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution.* Also consult reporter Ashraf Khalil's book, *Liberation Square.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2151348100056329 Published online by Cambridge University Press