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Ultimate Destination West

Sketches on Self Assertion: Arabic Theater at the Berlin “DisORIENTation” Festival

By EBERHARD SPRENG

The joke is well known: “The uncle returns from America and ...”. This time he brought with him a huge army: following the last weeks in Iraq, the young Egyptian theater creator Ahmed El Attar would have probably designed his play differently “Life is beautiful or Waiting for my Uncle from America”. Well, during the guest performance in the “DisORIENTation” Festival held in the Berlin House of World Cultures, the reality ferociously and grinningly takes revenge against art. The pictures of cheering Iraqis, celebrating the achievements of the Americans are shown all over the world – and El Attar shows us from an Egyptian perspective the ambivalent character of this adoration.

An Egyptian middle class family on its journey to the West: The father promises a life of luxury, skiing on the Swiss Alps up to vacations at summer resorts in Spain, while the youngest son requests a Levis Jeans for 180 Egyptian Pounds (hardly 30 Euros) and a Nokia mobile phone, the bed-ridden mother can only stammer some apologies, while her elder son is wading in a sea of newspapers searching for poetic meaningful snippets. The stage director, born 1969, exhibits different kinds of linguistic destructions, starting with the roaring young son expressing his needs, over to the patriarchic logorrhea of the father, who vehemently sees the order as being the mother of all things and up to the Arab-American Nonsense-Slang of the remote US-Uncle.

When his voice resounds from the Off, the characters stand in an Attention-Placement. We expect his visit, yet we do not know if he is coming or not. A whiff of “Wait for Godot”, a pinch of Thomas Bernhard with a linguistic study of a musical kind. It is excitingly comic to experience this in the performance of Ahmed Kamal and in foreign idioms. Only the house maid, who starts with the short grotesque-sarcastic performance performing ritualized cleaning processes and constantly hurrying in with house hold gadgets, speaks in simple prose of the beautiful lost things of the past. Since the language is still hers, so are the memories too, while the manipulation by the media, that gives through the government jargon an obstructed expression of the other, manifests an irrevocable loss of oneself.

Two observations worry Ahmed El Attar: the loss of the own cultural intellectual resources as well as the manipulation also on political level: “the Israeli-Palestinian conflict plays at present an important role in the Arab world. It is similarly utilized like the famous carrot, that is held before the donkey’s nose. All other bad catastrophes are concealed by it. Many billions currently leave Egyptians, taken by the business people, whose businesses have gone bankrupt. To draw the attention off the essence of our life problems, the Israeli-Palestinian problem is constantly pushed in the foreground and misused for the purpose of propaganda.”

El Attar lives in Paris and travels from there to the Arab World. In his theater making he is supported in Cairo by different foreign institutions, especially with his last big hit “Le Comité”. El Attar is a pioneer of an independent cultural activity in Egypt, and thus he is also one of the protagonists of the very small Renaissance of the cultural self assertion, that is to be observed at present. A Renaissance coming long after the golden age of the cultural breakup in the Arab World at the beginning of the 20th Century and following a period of downfall, that in El Attar’s view followed the defeat of the six-day-war of 1967. It is about clearing away the debris that remained after the collapse of western illusions and the destruction of the coherence within the traditional Arab societies.



Family : Scene from Ahmed El Attar’s Egyptian play “Life is beautiful”.

Picture: El Attar

While El Attar’s play broaches the issue of the problematic impact of consumption illusions, the Abla Khoury’s video performance “10/20 irrelevant” deals with life dreams of the young Lebanese living in the USA. The video performer Sherif El Azma presents an “Egyptian Hostess – Soap Opera” and examines the impact of western career models on the life of a young successful stewardess. All those plays were performed last weekend in the frame of the “DisORIENTATION”. The Lebanese choreograph Omar Rajeh came with “Shutter Speed” to Berlin, in it he is examining the model of movement within the traditional Egyptian Stick-Fighting and mixes it with the modern poses and masculine rituals. The result is half an hour of solo, a sketch which is rather a shaped work. But this too is an attempt to disenchant the dream worlds and to prepare a terrain, on which the Arabic contemporary culture can find pictures for its own reality.