

Rescue Operation 2:

Huda Wasfi:

Interview *

Of the five newly appointed managers of the state theatre companies, Hoda Wasfi stands out as a particularly happy choice. She combines deep theoretical knowledge with valuable practical experience and commands wide respect in theatrical circles. With her boundless energy and infectious enthusiasm, she will be a staunch and invaluable ally for Khashaba. Though an academic by training and profession, a serious theatre scholar and an unbendingly objective and straightforward person (too straightforward sometimes for the liking of some), she has the passionate temperament of an artist and the furious rhythm of a dynamo.

Her adventurous spirit, intellectual vitality, dedication and utter indifference to all the paraphernalia of office and outward shows of power have given Al-Hanager, which she has run for the past four years, its unique informal, zingy and thoroughly unbureaucratic atmosphere. She runs this active, highly productive, bustling place with only a handful of technicians and assistants. To reach her, you do not have to go through the usual, long, official rigmarole: if she is there, you just walk in and see her; and she has the rare talent of being able to attend to four or five people at once. She can sound sharp and peremptory at times, but only when she is faced with blatant negligence or inefficiency, and I have seen her sometimes driven to fury by some stupid law or bureaucratic regulation.

* 14 December 1995.

Sometimes Wasfi strikes me as one of those people who are never destined to lose their innocence or develop the slightest degree of cynicism. With two grown children, one married and one at university, she is still shockable and can handle neither malice nor deceit. It comes, I suppose, from being brought up to speak her mind frankly and from her long years in the cloisters of academia. Paradoxically, however, she does not lack worldly wisdom and has a very clear grasp of the mechanisms of cultural work in Egypt and its socio-political and ideological context.

Speaking of her plans to revive the National (an institution which over the years has sunk under the weight of its own history and stately reputation, as she described it) she said: "You cannot hope to disrupt the old, ossified institutions in a radical way quite suddenly. It has to be a gradual and subtle process. Take the Hanager, for example; it was originally conceived as part of this process. Its position on the fringe of the state-theatre institution is supposed to give it substantial freedom of movement; but the freedom is subtly controlled, since the centre has no independent budget and has constantly to appeal to the ministry for funds with every new project. One reads a kind of contradiction here, a hesitation, a reluctance to be pinned down to a definite course of action. Nevertheless, in time, this policy, timid and wary as it is, works. The gain in freedom, however slight, creates tremours that shake the foundations and, in time, they produce wider reverberations. What is sadly missing now is the power of direct confrontation. It is actually missing all over the world — perhaps because of the climate of postmodernism which does not encourage faith or certainty or direct conflict. Does not postmodernism, in one sense, mean living with contradictions and ambivalences and working through them? This is

what I am trying to do. It is difficult, exhausting and time consuming, but what can you do? I hope to do something at the National and have plans; but I realize I shall have to go about them carefully, in a round-about way, because there is a lot of resistance to change — the resistance of the dominant ideology, system of work, and private interests.”

Some of Wasfi's plans for bringing about gradual change without fruitless and counter-productive confrontations sound quite exciting. They include an honest reappraisal and sifting of the dramatic heritage of the National by giving public play-readings of all the texts in its repertory, followed by discussions with the audience to gauge their reactions; the ones that win favour will be entrusted to young directors to see what they make of them. The productions that result, plus the audience response, will help to determine, at least for this age, the value, viability and relevance of those texts. Even the plays of the hallowed sixties will be put on trial. Already a young female director, Iffat Yehya, is working on Saadeddin Wahba's famous *Sikkat as-Salama* (*The Road to Safety*). In fact, out of the seven productions Wasfi plans for the National this year, five will come from the theatre's cupboards. They will be done on a limited budget by young directors and address matinée audiences. The other two will be *grand* productions, targeting an older and more conservative audience. Eventually, Wasfi hopes that the National will appear on the tourist attractions list and that some of her productions will be fit to play in foreign international festivals. “It's a shame,” she says, “that over five years the National has not produced a single production fit to represent us at such festivals.”

Another of Wasfi's plans to attack the thick, dead tissue that has formed round the National over the years and pump new blood into it is cultural contact and exposure. Not one to let the grass grow under her feet, she has already arranged an all-the-year-round programme of cooperation with the Higher Institute of Theatre Technique in Avignon, and already three experts from the institute have arrived at the National and are conducting a lighting and sound workshop with the theatre's technical staff. She is also currently shopping around for an international director of great standing for a production of one of Moliere's plays. This is her way of nudging awake the pantheon of veteran actors she has inherited with the National.

"These people," she says, "will never accept to do a workshop. But if I invite a well-known international director every year to direct them in a play, they will feel challenged and flattered and want to work with him. It will not change the method of acting they have been brought up in and used for years, but it will definitely refine it and make it more sophisticated. It is a kind of cross fertilization which, I am sure, will have positive results. The talented artist — and most of these people are really talented, however old and set in their ways — cannot resist a chance to develop his or her skills and discover new rhythms. And mind you, these people have their audiences too, who like their traditional method of acting and I intend to cater for them, and even for the lovers of melodrama. It is still a very popular form as I argued in one of my papers."

Wasfi's association with Al-Hanager and the Experimental Theatre Festival (whose director she was for many years) has given her a false reputation for favouring only the new and experimental in art. In fact, she does enjoy all forms of theatre so long as they are well done. On the

question of technical skills and new modes in performance, she says: "I do not want the Egyptian theatre to fall into the trap of extreme formalism as the Tunisians have done. Nor do I want it to remain imprisoned in the old formulas. We have to find a middle way."

The middle way may come about through another contemplated cross-fertilization process between Al-Hanager and the National on the model of the Comedie Française and the Vieux Colombier theatres. Jacques Lassalle established the latter when he took over the leadership of the former to serve as a base for experimenting with new ideas. The association proved highly fruitful and Wasfi intends to try it; but neither establishment will lose its autonomy.

The French model in theatre and cultural matters in general haunts Wasfi's mind. She admires the way the French manage and promote their culture. "The French take their culture very seriously and treat it as a *figure de marque*, as an ambassador abroad," she says. "Their ministry of culture works in close association with their ministry of foreign affairs which has a special department called the *Association Française d'Action Artistique* (AFAA)." The whole world, indeed, she continues, has finally woken up to the vital importance of cultural development, as the U.N. Decade for Cultural Development project testifies. Through festivals, the French have managed to make obscure cities like Avignon and Nantes internationally famous, and very prosperous in the process. The British did the same for Glasgow, replacing its old grim image with an attractive, exciting one and creating jobs for thousands of people. Culture, she firmly believes, is as important as bread, and the returns of investment in culture are enormous both on the economic and human levels.

“When you hold an annual festival like *Les Allumés* over six years in an old city like Nantes – it is really an old port – and expose its conservative community to different modes of art from all over the world, you are actually teaching that community all about cultural plurality and difference, the need for tolerance, for accepting the otherness of the other, and reveling in it, and for respecting cultural specificity.”

In citing the French and other European cultural models, Wasfi is not advocating slavish imitation, but, rather, seeking inspiration as well as confirmation of what she deeply believes in. Besides, she is one of those people who have a dialectical cast of mind and can only think through comparisons. She also has a habit of illustrating and corroborating her ideas with examples; it is as if she feels a need for anchoring all ideas and abstract concepts in a tangible reality that gives them validation. That is why when she tries to understand and define the National theatre in its present condition, she tends to view it in relation to the Comedie Française on which it was originally modelled. And when she tries to understand what is wrong with her society, she finds it fruitful to compare it with others in specific, concrete terms, through examples. With her, meaning can only emerge through this dialectical process which entails a close investigation of lived experience – hers and others’. A woman like Wasfi can only succeed at the National. But even if the system proves too much for her, she will give a good fight before she concedes defeat.