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## Arab Stages

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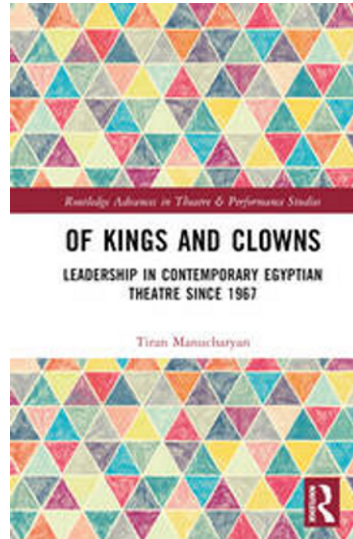
# Review: OF KINGS AND CLOWNS: LEADERSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY EGYPTIAN THEATRE SINCE 1967 By Tiran Manucharyan.

By Areeg Ibrahim

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OF KINGS AND CLOWNS: LEADERSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY EGYPTIAN THEATRE SINCE 1967. By Tiran Manucharyan. Routledge Advances in Theatre and Performance Studies. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2024; pp. 270.



Tiran Manucharyan's *Of Kings and Clowns: Leadership in Contemporary Egyptian Theatre Since 1967* is an important addition to the literature on theatre and leadership. Manucharyan who is a Lecturer of Arabic as well as Comparative Literature at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland is a budding scholar of Egyptian theatre. Composed of 270 pages, this monograph is a rewriting of the author's PhD dissertation and is comprised of a preface, an introduction, seven chapters and a conclusion. The book deals with the transformations of Egyptian theatre since 1967 until the 2011 revolution through theoretical discourses, essays and plays of Yusuf Idris, as well as the analysis of the plays of Abul-'Ela El-Salamouny, Lenin El-Ramly, and Fathia El-'Assal, along with some theatre makers of the younger generation such as Sondos Shabayek, Mahmoud Gamal Hedeny, and Magdy El-Hamzawy.

In the preface, Manucharyan explains that the book explores the development of Egyptian theatre since the period following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, shedding light on political and cultural leadership. The author maintains, "The book observes the ways Egyptian theatre has negotiated its place within the socio-political environment in which it operates, not only transforming itself but also inciting transformation" (xi). The author also proposes that this book is innovative as a monograph in English that provides an examination of the progress of theatre as well as a detailed analysis of plays, focusing on leadership and taking gender into consideration, especially in the dramatic and theatrical works of women playwrights and theatre makers.

In the introduction, the author begins by exploring the way in which events on stage can integrate with real-life events, and recalls the essays of iconic Egyptian playwright Yusuf Idris who proposed removing the boundaries between stage and audience, in order to emphasize theatre's role

in society. After going through the relationship between leadership and theatre, Manucharyan refers to the works of some of the major Egyptian playwrights of the period, referring to Idris, El-Salamouny, El-Ramly and El-'Assal.

In chapter one, "*Tamasruh: Between Theatricalisation and Carnavalesque*," the author links Yusuf Idris' *tamasruh*, a coined term which refers to dissolving the boundary between audience and spectator, with Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque. The chapter links these concepts to the overarching theme: the relation of clowns and jesters to the carnivalesque. By extension, intellectuals/playwrights represent such archetypes, especially when they assume their role as leaders in the society. Idris' vision of theatre, which is informed by indigenous popular forms of Egyptian theatre, such as the shadow theatre (*khayal al-zill*) and open-air rural performances (*sami*), calls for the stage as a space for public and collective participation (21). The chapter explores such concepts in relation to the plays of El-Salamouny, El-Ramly, and El-'Assal.

Each of the next four chapters takes up individual playwrights. Chapter two continues to explore Yusuf Idris' ideas about establishing a uniquely Egyptian theatre, and then brings the discussion back to the clown and the role of women, with some references to plays of the aforementioned playwrights. (Since both this chapter and the previous engage in Idris' thought, one wonders why they were not integrated into one chapter.) Chapter three focuses on the role of theatre and explores representations of leadership in the plays of Abul-'Ela El-Salamouny. Similar to Idris' ideas, El-Salamouny integrates indigenous forms of performance and theatricalization in his plays in order to have an open dialogue with the audience (63). The plays are discussed in relation to what they present about leaders, kings, clowns and women. Chapter four explores Lenin El-Ramly's use of comedy as "the art of cunning" to satirize the socio-political milieu. Despite El-Ramly's slightly different stance on the use of indigenous popular forms in theatre, his use of meta-dramatic techniques also offers a space for theatricalization. As in many of his plays, El-Ramly makes use of foolishness and madness to explore authoritarianism and institutionalization versus leadership and social change. Chapter five links silence and carnivalization while discussing the plays of Fathia El-'Assal, as representative of Egyptian women playwrights. Manucharyan opines, "She makes female characters central to the action, yet still silent and muted to start with, making them seen and heard within the silence" (158). El-'Assal's plays thus portray leadership, women rights and societal inequalities.

The final two chapters take up the 2011 revolution and the theatre it inspired. In chapter six, "Of Times and Spaces," the author begins by referring to the 2011 revolution and then sheds light on the realities of the revolutionary change. The chapter discusses the time and space of the discussed plays (a part that could have been integrated into the previous chapters) before moving to explore how public spaces played a role during revolutionary times. The chapter then relates the revolution to the carnivalesque and the emergence of verbatim theatre, or public spectacles that are based on lived testimonies of the revolution. Some women theatre makers also had a paramount role in producing such kind of theatre. Chapter seven, "Theatre and the Revolution," focuses on the post-2011 plays. It explores the relationship between theatre and the 2011 revolution in relation to the plays of the younger generation of theatre makers as well as some post-revolution plays by the previously-discussed dramatists. The chapter suggests that the 2011 revolution had its impact on theatre in allowing for the emergence of new forms and new voices (213). For instance, Sondos Shabayek and team's *Tahrir Monologues* presented verbatim documentary theatre that narrated testimonies of the revolution's participants. Mahmoud Gamal Hedeny and Mohamed Gabr's *1980 Onwards* dramatized the uncertainty of Egyptian youth after the revolution. As for Magdy El-Hamzawy's *Report on Revolutionary Circumstances*, it was a staged play about the role of an underprivileged kid in supporting the revolution.

To sum up, Tiran Manucharyan's *Of Kings and Clowns: Leadership in Contemporary Egyptian Theatre Since 1967* provided an encyclopedic study of Egyptian theatre from the last third of the twentieth century onto the 2011 revolution. The book is a good read both for an average reader as well as scholars and students of theatre and Arabic studies. The strength of the book lies in its survey and analysis of leadership, carnivalization, and the search for a theatrical national identity in the plays of three established playwrights, as well as three theatre makers of the younger generation. The book uses these phenomena as lenses to look at the plays El-Salamouny, El-Ramly, and El-'Assal both individually and in relationship to one another. The book also clearly uses the ideas of Egyptian playwright Yusuf Idris as part of the theoretical literature about the discussion. It is unclear as to whether the analysis of Idris' plays is central to the book's arguments about these phenomena or simply helps clarify the playwright's theoretical concepts. The book also could have benefited from using some of the topical literature in leadership studies. Overall, the book engages both the specialized and average reader in a journey with bits and pieces of enjoyable information and analyses about Egyptian theatre and representative plays. The book closes with a profound analysis of the 2011 revolution and highlights the role Egyptian theatre performances narrated, documented, and came to terms with that event.

## About The Author(s)

**Areeg Ibrahim** is Professor and Chair of the Department of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Arts in Helwan University, Cairo and was the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research at Effat University, KSA. She has published widely in both Arabic and English on Arabic and international Drama. She is the co-editor of a Routledge volume, *Rewriting Narratives in Egyptian Theatre*. She has also translated a number of Theatre books for the National Center for Translation.

## Arab Stages

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**Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, The CUNY Graduate Center**

365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016-4309 | ph: 212-817-1860 | mestc@gc.cuny.edu

