

Mohamed Enani's Historical Drama: Contemporary Perspectives in Timeless Theatrical Forms

*Mustafa Riad**

Mohamed Enani (1939–2023), a playwright whose dramatic works deserve critical attention, draws inspiration from the rich history of Egypt, spanning across different ages. Enani's works explore the past and discover remarkable parallels between historical eras and present-time concerns and dilemmas. With a keen focus on introducing Arab stage techniques and local cultural concepts parallel to Western theatre, Enani showcases his creative genius and brings a unique blend of artistic traditions to the forefront. As a distinguished professor of English literature and a translator of twenty-four out of the thirty-seven Shakespearean plays, Enani skillfully weaves elements from the works of the Bard into his productions, further enriching the theatrical experience of his audiences.

This paper explores Enani's relationship between history and the present time against Arabized theatre practices and cultural concepts. References are also made to parallel situations and speeches that Enani draws from Shakespeare's plays. The plays selected in order of publication are three Arabic full-length plays: *Al Ghirbān* [The Crows] (1986), *Jasūs fī Qaṣr al-Sultān* [A Spy in the Sultan's Palace] (1990), *Al-Darwīsh wa-l-Ghāziya* [The Dervish and the Dancer] (1994), and a one-act play: *Qiṣṣat Manzil* [The Story of a House] (1993).

“The Story of a House,” though a one-act play, encompasses the broad lines of Enani's dramatic art. The setting in the “Story of a House” is the vestibule of an ancient mameluke-Turkish palace. The characters are a young man called Mutawalli, who comes to inspect the house as a potential tenant, an old man called Shabour dressed in a *jalabiya*, who is the landlord, and a middle-aged man, Shabour's nephew, named Aasi. The place has a historical ambience with ancient Islamic engravings and wood ornamentation, and the floor is covered with rich carpets. The place is dusty, Shabour coughs. It turns out that the house is an ancient monument that stood for ages and resisted any attempt at demolishing it. The landlord attributes this failure to pull down the house to the influence of spirits who prevent any attempt to demolish it. Though Mutawalli, the potential tenant, likes the house, he finds it wanting in modern convenience appliances. He is also a teacher in a nearby school and obviously represents knowledge that opposes such superstitions. He is visited by Attwa the grocer who offers his services and warns him of the spirits in the house. Mussa, one of Mutawalli's students appears and discusses with his teacher some

* Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Ain Shams University.

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lines of verse that are missing from a poem engraved in the bathroom. It turns out the complete poem is engraved in an ancient mosque. Both are interested in poetry in order to set a date for the construction of the house; they thus emphasize the importance of verifying and consolidating national heritage. Mutawalli receives an unknown visitor who discusses with him the excellent calligraphy of the quotations beautifully drawn in the ancient house. They both share an admiration for the artistic achievement evident in that house. Mussa, the student, publishes an article about the historical value of the house. His publication arouses the anger of Shahbour and Aasi who plan to evict Mutawalli, who revealed the true worth of the house, and reconsidered their superstitious beliefs in expectation of material gain. They both plan to pull down the house, looking for a hidden treasure, and build a modern apartment building in its place. The unknown visitor revisits Mutawalli and states that the house will be destroyed because the people no longer love it or care for it. The persistence of history and traditional values depend on people's attachment to them is Enani's message at the open ending of the play.

In Enani's poetic play *The Crows*, audiences are transported to the oppressive era of a ruling regime in Egypt. Through powerful symbolism, the crows represent the governor and his companions who exploit the nation's wealth for their own gain. They are also falsely accused by the people of Egypt of stealing the entire wheat harvest. However, it is revealed that the crows have instead distributed the wheat among all the people, highlighting their role as protectors of the nation's wealth plundered by the oppressive rulers. The setting of the play is a square in front of the governor's palace, reminiscent of popular arts that resonate with the Egyptian heritage. Here again, storytellers, particularly the storyteller of time, narrate the tale to the audience, weaving a narrative that aligns with the epic tradition of Brecht while also maintaining a connection to the Egyptian art forms of *al-samir* theater.

Enani's portrayal of the storyteller of time presents history from the perspective of the ordinary people, challenging the official narrative promoted by those in power and their historians. This narrative technique resonates with the concept of the archaeology of knowledge, as described by Foucault ([1969] 2002, 148, 155–56). However, it acquires a unique Egyptian flavor as the play unfolds, empowering the people and illustrating their triumph over the governor's attempts to steal the wheat and preserve his position. Ultimately, the governor is isolated, and the people emerge victorious.

At the heart of the story, we encounter two young lovers, Zuhair and Maisa. Enticed by the allure of a comfortable life, Maisa succumbs to the governor's request to join his harem. A scheming minister then conspires to kidnap Maisa and keep her in his possession. The plan was for Zuhair to reunite with his former beloved and reveal the truth about the disappeared wheat. The minister would eavesdrop and get the information that would allow him to gain favor with the Sultan and replace the current governor. However, their efforts to expose the conspiracy succeed when the governor is removed from his position and the minister loses his position. The secret of the crows remains safe.

Enani's *The Crows* serves as a powerful portrayal of resistance and empowerment in the face of oppressive regimes. Through its rich symbolism, engagement with Egyptian artistic traditions, and challenges to official narratives, the play highlights the strength and resilience of the people. Enani underscores the importance of unity and collective action in the pursuit of justice and liberation by reclaiming their nation's wealth and triumphing over corrupt rulers.

In his play *The Dervish and the Dancer*, Enani addresses the phenomenon of religious hypocrisy and the false claims of deceitful dervishes who offer easy solutions to people who trust them out of ignorance and surrender to a naive perception of religion. Enani shapes the play as a "fantastic musical comedy". The play is filled with satirical scenes that juxtapose the deception of dervishes and the ignorance of people, and it is enriched with the element of imagination, which Enani exploits through the extraordinary ability of the dervish to travel from the present to the past, driven by his reading of Arabic heritage books, especially the songs of Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. 356/967) and the history of Ibn Jāhūr Tabarī (d. 310/923). Whether Abu Subaa' travels to the pre-Islamic or Umayyad era, Enani presents life in both eras as diverse, ranging from manifestations of art, especially poetry and singing, to despotism and violence. He strips away the idealized image of the earlier eras that fundamentalists have propagated during the time of writing the play.

The events of the play conclude with Abu Subaa' being trapped in the past and finding no way to return to the present. Abdullah, his one-time assistant, takes his place as the new dervish, continuing to deceive people and making gains at their expense. The play is also full of popular songs and chants performed by a musical band accompanying the present-day dervish Abu Subaa' and heritage music sung by female singers and musicians from ancient times. In the closing remarks appended to the play, Enani affirms that he intended to reveal three phenomena prevalent in Egyptian society when writing the play in 1991, all based on deception. The spread of religious fundamentalism, which took on the form of a facade hiding its emptiness, is the first of them. Secondly, the exploiting religion to deceive people and take their money in what is known as "blessing revelations" is the second of them. This is finally followed by the third phenomenon of popular youth music that has no connection to Arabic music relying instead on pre-recorded music played on organs and lacking the Eastern spirit.

In the play, the elements of alienation are clear, as Abu Subaa' admits that he is an actor and that all the characters are playing roles. The same is true for Abdullah when he takes his place after his disappearance. The dance and singing performances contribute to breaking the theatrical illusion as well. All of this is an invitation for the viewers to reflect on what they are watching and to understand the problem and possible solutions. They themselves are to blame. In other words, Enani seems to be adopting Brechtian alienation techniques; however, the setting of his play recalls similar techniques of alienation in the Arabic tradition of the narrator (*al-rawī*) and the traditions of the show known as *al-Samir*.

Al-Samir Theatre is an Egyptian traditional art form that dates back to the medieval period, presenting musical and theatrical performances that reflect Egyptian life and culture. It is further characterized by its beautiful and diverse artistic forms and varied shows. *Fann al-Furja* is a part of *al-Samir* Theater's arts, where it presents a theatrical performance that combines musical, heritage, and narrative elements. *Al-Furja* portrays historical or folk stories, Egyptian customs, and traditions. It may also include humor and wit to entertain the audience.

In *A Spy in the Sultan's Palace*, Enani presents a comedy with a political flavor whose plot takes place during the conflict between the Arabs and the Tartars. Enani portrays political power in Egypt as tainted by corruption and the dominance of private interests over public interests. The Mamluks are preoccupied with the war against *al-rūm* [The Byzantines] to gather spoils and enslaved people, neglecting the preparations for fighting the Tatars who threaten the borders. In fact, the Sultan seeks to marry the daughter of the Tatar king. The political atmosphere is not without ambitious conspirators seeking to overthrow the Sultan and seize power. Furthermore, false victories are announced to the people in contrast to the actual consecutive defeats taking place against the Tatars.

The play begins with a shipwreck of a ship that Mahmud and the Cairo carpenters were waiting for to make the wedding furniture for the newlyweds. Mahmud, a young man who loves his country, is with a group of craftsmen in a neighborhood in old Cairo discussing the bad conditions. Mahmud, who is conscious of the flaws of the politicians in his time, decides to take the initiative and go to the Sultan's palace to try to obtain the wood that is abundantly available in the palace yard. In the Sultan's palace, a case of mistaken identity takes place. Mahmoud is mistaken for a Tatar spy. He meets several characters in the palace that represent the turbulent political atmosphere inside the palace. There is Lady Khatoun, the daughter of the former Sultan who was killed by the current Sultan, who sees in Mahmud, the dark knight who will save the country from oppression. There is also Ghazia, the Egyptian woman who grew up among the Mamluks but chose to side with the people against the oppression and corruption of the Mamluks and seeks to persuade Mahmud to join her. The rivals Sayf al-Din and Alim al-Din compete for power, a competition that reaches its zenith when Sayf al-Din kills the Sultan and falsely accuses Mahmud of being the Tatar spy. Mahmud even meets the Sultan, who mistakenly recognizes him as a collaborator with the Tatars. The Sultan, nonetheless, treats him gently and reminds him of his marriage proposal to the daughter of the Tatar king, which shocks Mahmud and leads him to show aversion to the Sultan's plan on national grounds.

Action escalates when Sayf al-Din kills the Sultan and Ghazia and tries to strike a deal with Mahmud, whom he imagines to be a Tatar. The conflict between Sayf al-Din and Alim al-Din intensifies when Alim al-Din arrives and discovers Mahmud's identity; he accuses Sayf al-Din of killing the Sultan and tries to bribe Mahmud through offering him the wood he came to ask for. However, Mahmud's comrades in the old Cairo neighborhood take action to rescue Mahmud and free him from the grip of the Mamluk princes. Mahmud confronts the princes, and the masses join him to end the system of oppression and tyranny. The play ends with the burning of the

woods in the Sultan's palace yard. Still, Mahmud's determination and the people of Cairo's resolve remain steadfast as they commit to fighting the Tatars, welcoming more shipments of wood once they achieve victory, and ensuring the control of Egypt's affairs by its people.

Enani emphasizes the people's role in governing their country if they realize their power and take action to end the corruption of their rulers. Mahmud's patriotism and his positive initiative to obtain wood are not enough; he only truly begins to make a difference when his colleagues and the masses of Cairo rally around him.

Enani draws upon his extensive knowledge of Shakespeare as the translator of the largest number of Shakespearean translations into Arabic. Shakespearean characters and plots have a universal dimension; however, Shakespeare gives them local English colour. In parallel, Enani is inspired by Shakespearean characters and situations. For instance, in his *The Dervish and the Dancer*, though Shakespeare's Falstaff and Enani's dervish belong to different literary worlds, separated by centuries and cultures, a striking similarity can be found in their roles as deceivers who adeptly pull off acts to appear as something they are not. Sir John Falstaff, a character in Shakespeare's plays, uses his wit and charm to deceive those around him, presenting himself as a brave and honorable knight. Similarly, Enani's dervish, in his stories and teachings, assumes the disguise of a blessed sheikh capable of multiplying sums of money entrusted to him. Both characters exemplify the art of deception, using their acts to explore deeper truths about human nature and the complexities of the human experience.

A Spy in the Sultan's Palace recalls Shakespeare's plays renowned for their intricate plots of mistaken identity, which play a central role in enhancing the dramatic tension and comedic elements. Similarly, Mahmud the carpenter in Enani's play epitomizes the theme of mistaken identity as he is falsely identified as a Tartar spy. This parallel demonstrates how Shakespeare and Enani explore the consequences and comedic potential of mistaken identities. By intertwining the lives of their characters in a web of confusion, both playwrights ingeniously tap comic resources to further the progress of their plots.

The subject matter of some famous speeches in Shakespearean plays also inspires Enani. In *A Spy in the Sultan's Palace*, the source is Cassius' speech belittling the grandeur of Caesar – a speech addressed to Brutus:

For once, upon a raw and gusty day,
 The troubled Tiber chafing with her shores,
 Caesar said to me 'Darest thou, Cassius, now
 Leap in with me into this angry flood,
 And swim to yonder point?' Upon the word,
 Accoutred as I was, I plunged in
 And bade him follow; so indeed he did.
 The torrent roar'd, and we did buffet it
 With lusty sinews, throwing it aside

And stemming it with hearts of controversy;
But ere we could arrive the point proposed,
Caesar cried 'Help me, Cassius, or I sink!'
I, as Aeneas, our great ancestor,
Did from the flames of Troy upon his shoulder
The old Anchises bear, so from the waves of Tiber
Did I the tired Caesar. And this man
Is now become a god, and Cassius is
A wretched creature and must bend his body,
If Caesar carelessly but nod on him.
He had a fever when he was in Spain,
And when the fit was on him, I did mark
How he did shake: 'tis true, this god did shake;
His coward lips did from their colour fly,
And that same eye whose bend doth awe the world
Did lose his lustre: I did hear him groan:
Ay, and that tongue of his that bade the Romans
Mark him and write his speeches in their books,
Alas, it cried 'Give me some drink, Titinius,'
As a sick girl. Ye gods, it doth amaze me
A man of such a feeble temper should
So get the start of the majestic world
And bear the palm alone. (I.ii. 101-132)

In a parallel situation, Sayf al-Din, bearing a grudge against the Sultan, has a similar speech in a context adapted to the Mameluke era. He addresses Alam al-Din with these lines:

عندما عدنا غداة الروح نجتاز الفلاة
وهبطنا بطن واد ليس يبدو منتهاه
هبت الريح سموما عاصفة
تملاً الوادي فحيحاً ونباحاً وعواء
وغدا العثير في الجو سحابات سواد
تحجب الشمس كأن الكون تاه
زاغت الأبصار وأبيضت من الخوف الشفاه
وبدا الركب شعاباً يذرع المهمة في كل اتجاه
كلهم ينشد ما يعصمه
كلهم يرجو سبيلاً للنجاة
وانثنى ذا المنتره يستجير ويستغيث
"أين سيف الدين؟" صاح
"أين ذلك القائد المغوار؟ أين مضى الكمأة؟"
لم أزل أذكر صوته
ضارعاً بل ذاهلاً بل غافلاً عمّا عداه
وأنا فوق جواد قد تبهنس

يألف الظلمة بالأهوال يأنس
سَلَّ عيون المهر كيف وجدت صاحبنا المؤلّه
سَلَّ ذراعي كيف شدته وألفته على سرجي ذليلاً يتأوه
"جئت سيف الدين؟" صاح
"عسكري ياسيف طارت في الرياح
أه يا سيف رعاك الله للإسلام .. دُخِرًا .." وبكى
ذلك الحاكم رب السيف
فاض الدمع من عينيه كالطفل الصغير
لم أغافل صاحب العين الهتون
بل نفخت في البوق واجتزت الكتائب
حاملاً إياه خلفي بينما صاح النفير
اتبعوا سيفاً إلى حيث يسير
ونجوناً. (٣٣ - ٣٥)

When we returned after the night of terror, we crossed the vastness
And descended into a valley with no apparent end
The wind blew with a poisonous storm
Filling the valley with howls, barks, and cries
And the sky was filled with dark clouds
Blocking the sun as if the universe had lost its way
Vision blurred, and lips turned pale with fear
The horsemen broke up, scattering in every direction
All seeking protection.
They all hoped for a way to salvation
And the noble one stooped to seek refuge and plea
"Where is Sayf al-Din?" he shouted
Where is that fearless leader? Where has the courageous knight gone?
I still remember his voice
Pleading, lost, oblivious to what lies ahead
And I was atop a sauntering horse
Familiar with darkness and horrors.
Ask the eyes of the mare how I found our deified companion,
Ask my arms how they embraced him and placed him on my saddle,
While he moaned like a wretch.
"Have you arrived, Sayf al-Din?" he shouted
"My soldiers, O Sayf al-Din were carried away by the winds
Oh, Sayf al-Din, may Allah protect you for Islam as a shield," and he wept.
That ruler, the master of the sword!
Tears flowed from his eyes like a young child
I had mercy on that man of tender eyes,
So I blew the trumpet and passed through the ranks
Carrying him behind me while the horn sounded:
Follow Sayf al-Din wherever he leads!

And we were saved. (1990, 33-35; translation mine)

In the realms of military prowess and masculine power, two compelling speeches emerge from the works of William Shakespeare and Mohamed Enani. Cassius's speech in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and Sayf al-Din's lines in Enani's *A Spy in the Sultan's Palace* both serve as powerful examples of military men who belittle their rivals and prove them unworthy. Cassius, a conspirator against Caesar, eloquently discredits Caesar's might by questioning his physical ability and mocking his vulnerabilities. On the other hand, Sayf al-Din, a soldier in the Sultan's army, displays a sharp tongue and keen wit as he cunningly debunks the competence of the Sultan as a mere illusion, exposing his true weaknesses. Although separated by time and cultural contexts, Cassius, and Sayf al-Din mirror each other in their ability to use words to undermine and diminish their adversaries' stature in the eyes of their audiences.

In conclusion, Mohamed Enani's plays based on and inspired by history offer a captivating exploration of the relationship between history and the present time, showcasing his creative genius and unique blend of artistic traditions. By drawing inspiration from Egypt's rich history and introducing Arabized stage techniques and local cultural concepts, Enani establishes a connection between different eras and sheds light on present-day concerns and dilemmas. Furthermore, his incorporation of Shakespearean elements enriches the theatrical experience for audiences, providing a universal dimension with a local Egyptian flavor. Through his thought-provoking theatrical techniques, Enani challenges official narratives and empowers the ordinary people, illustrating their triumph over oppressive forces. Overall, Enani's work is a testament to his profound understanding of the past and the present and his ability to captivate audiences with his dramatic mastery.

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