

ROUNDTABLE

## Our Voices Persist

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Three presidents suspended us from work by direct order when they rose to power. We have no personal relationship with them, nor does our cultural work, which lies at the margins of their power, intersect with them. We have never stood in opposition to them or even attempted to speak against them on social media, but they, nevertheless, prohibited us from work. When he assumed power in France, President Sarkozy decreed a reduction of the foreign culture budget. At the time, in 2009, we had been working for nine years in partnership with the French Cultural Center in Alexandria. In 2016, we signed a very beneficial contract with the US consulate in Alexandria to fund our work. Considering our excellent relationship with the consulate, we hoped this would last for five years. President Trump, however, decreased the foreign aid budget, and the consulate in Alexandria shut down accordingly. The President of Egypt, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, gave an order to suspend or cancel all cultural activities that take place in the street. At that time, between 2011 and 2017, our work was widespread throughout Egypt's public areas, but al-Sisi requested, in a "friendly manner," that we cease our work in the street. Now, we are out of work; we do not share our stories with the presidents. Yet we keep our spirits high because we know we have the means to survive and the ability to stand firm on our feet. As a result of our proactive planning and our artistic and cultural achievements, from the beginning we have remained confident that our voices matter and will persist.

I belong to the margins—be they social, artistic, or cultural—and find joy in all the unseen aspects. You can travel around the world, one day fine dining, the next eating street food, yet still confront and remain closely attentive to the challenges of social and economic issues. I, or more precisely Al-Madina (The City), the institution I work for, can offer training and, in any Egyptian street, construct exhibitions that incorporate social issues and build bridges with wider society. We also present contemporary performances that challenge conceptions of art and reception, in different languages with multi-national actors, and have further taken artistic risks, creating installation art and exhibitions in nontraditional settings. All of this is possible because of our position on the margins. We do not aim to work from the center, either within a governmental framework or with established political forces. We have left that space willingly and instead taken our position on the margins. We do not want to appear on media outlets, nor to impose our experience on anyone; nevertheless, those in power seek to destroy us and lay claim to the narrow margins in which we once took joy.

The state dominates the field of cultural production, restricting the scope of both amateurs and professionals, claiming a monopoly of expertise via the syndicates, which it saddles with complicated, cumbersome procedures as a way to control both the product and the producers. Likewise it controls the means of finance and the administration of production, possesses most exhibition halls and screens, and defines the aims of culture and art. Additionally, it determines the needs and public demands of the marketplace by branding the so-called commercial and populist as ugly objects inspired by the violence of the underworld. Finally, the state packages all artistic and cultural products into competitions and festivals, which tends to render the cost of production larger than the product itself, particularly in the fields of literature and theater.

Moreover, we root our perspective of arts and culture in a more liberal understanding, in which cultural and artistic work is an integral right of citizens; we believe it is everyone's right to receive cultural and artistic training and benefit from available cultural outlets. The sector of cultural and creative production should be independent in its administration irrespective of funding sources, whether funding

comes from the state, donations, or otherwise. Our understanding of arts and culture goes beyond traditional and amateur frameworks to include an in-depth study of humans, social issues, and cultural challenges. We need a more flexible approach to artistic form in which artists and everyone engaged in cultural production (whether in theater, music, visual arts, etc.) are free to imagine their tools and their work without limitations. Moreover, there should be continuous training, networking, and liaisons among local artists, the general public, and fellow artists across borders for further development of their work while showing respect for universal human rights.

Institutions cannot manufacture thoughts, the arts, or culture; their role is limited to supporting the process of producing culture and the arts, which is not an easy task since cultural and artistic production require a familiarity with institutional structures, a relentless struggle to provide platforms for free expression, and an ability to locate means of production as well as sources of funding. In the end, it is the citizens, the artists, and the intellectuals themselves who are the true manufacturers of culture and the arts.

From my own personal standpoint, all the rhetoric surrounding cultural and creative work about sophistication, progress, and creating citizens is a total myth, something all who work in the field know. Cultural and artistic work provides a voice that can stand up to authority. My cultural and artistic work has given me a voice at school and university and in the public sphere since my early childhood. This voice is what those who are in power wish to restrain and to silence. Small ideas that grow on the margins of authority are the voices of artists and intellectuals. Because the authorities do not want these ideas to flourish and make their way to the center, they constrain the margins. This was the reason behind the decision of the presidents to erase the margins; it is a way to silence our voices. The state sometimes takes over our production techniques, used by artists and active, thinking individuals, forgetting that modernity and modernization are not just tools, methods, or artistic forms. Rather, they are ideas that artists and intellectuals have diligently created and cultivated.

The source of our strength is our voices that convey our opinions, our thoughts, and the struggles on the margins. When we admit our weakness, our inability, and our reluctance to challenge authority, it is from our desire to stay on the margins. We also confess that our message to the public needs rethinking. Unfortunately, we have no political platforms or foundations for our work. As independent artists, we suffer from a lack of community.

Perhaps because many of those who align themselves with cultural work, which lies at the margins of the state, belong in one way or another to the state's security apparatuses, or perhaps because of their lack of cultural awareness, most of the independent workers in this field are compelled to find other sources of income, which is their right. Only a few have taken on the challenge and risk of devoting themselves full-time to independent arts—like those of us in our institution, Al-Madina. Despite our struggles and low income, which invite gratuitous accusations of failure by those around us, we know that it is only through a methodology of participatory partnerships, meeting different needs, adopting new strategies, creative and critical thinking, and finding means of collaboration, outreach, and interconnection that we guarantee our continuous ability to survive and overcome crises. Our voices matter.

In our work, which started in 2000 and has lasted to the present, we have been able to move forward because we listened to our surroundings and because we offered practical solutions that serve as tangible examples. We came up with the idea of establishing an independent theater troupe, presented a model for it, and held an open discussion regarding the ideas of independence and free production. As the number of independent theater troupes increased, we were in need of more recruiting and training. Consequently, we established the Alexandria Independent Theater Forum from 2009 to 2010. Then, we noted the need of workers for control over their production tools, so the Studio City project was established from 2011 to 2014, and more than 100 groups were trained accordingly. In addition, we trained more than ten groups to work on exhibition halls and cultural management to establish certain programs and activities that would yield profitable incomes. Based on our model, spaces have been proudly utilized in Alexandria and Egypt at large.

When the Egyptian revolution erupted in January 2011 and with the end of the independence movement, there began a new reality; everyone wanted to go out into the street and present their artwork. Because the artists lacked experience, we presented the strategy (called "practice in the street") in three renditions from 2011 to 2014. This experience was based on involving community members themselves in the various stages of cultural production, from choosing subjects, to participating in public rehearsals,

to logistics. This is what led us to develop the Street Carnival (*karnifal al-shari' a*) between 2015 and 2018. This is an approach to street theater inspired by the culture of minorities that provides a positive means through which to solve societal problems by using unique artistic solutions, such as the joy of the carnival. Thereafter, we gave performances in Egypt, Morocco, and Palestine. Our approach has been selected as one of the best practices in the Mediterranean region for working with women, migrants, and refugees.

Throughout these years, we presented contemporary artistic and innovative productions that combined theater with multiple media and multiple languages as well as contemporary writings. Likewise, we presented joint multinational theater productions and a number of documentary films, entered the adventurous world of contemporary exhibition, and—more importantly—presented three open-air exhibitions and installation art shows.

Despite the current situation and lack of resources, we remain optimistic about the future, in part because we have global connections—in Egypt, the Mediterranean, and Europe—through which we are able to collaborate. This is what has allowed us to persist until now.

**Ahmed Saleh** is a contemporary artist, theatre and film director, and cultural manager. He has put on hundreds of street performances and has produced two documentary films, *Hunna wa Khitab Obama* (2010), *Zay al-'Askari* (2011). In 2000, he founded Al-Madina Organization for Arts in Alexandria.

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