

ROUNDTABLE

## A Talk That Never Really Happened in Time

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Since having partially failed to verbalize my reflections on “creating from within,” I felt a conversation left unfinished.

I felt the conversation had not even been properly started.

I blamed myself.

But I did not know why it had been more difficult than usual to express my thoughts.

To pin down what I have been doing over the years and question it.

Maybe it was the word “crisis.”

A word I cannot deal with, at least not in relation to 2011.

For me the crisis is now. Manifested since 2013.

Then it hit me.

A naive young journalist set up her camera in Berlin.

To do her first video interview for an online theater magazine.

She asked:

“Can you tell me your most extreme experiences in the revolution?”

I answered

“No I cannot.”

She asked several other questions about politics.

I found myself somewhere between refusing and failing to answer.

A month earlier I canceled a site-specific project I was supposed to do in Cairo.

A research based on the abstract concept of disappearance.

A project if I was truthful about my obsession with forced disappearances.

But that I was not really allowed to even say.

I thought I had burnout but after I canceled I knew.

It was the fear that made me say I will postpone the project.

The fear of producing in fear.

With fear.

Or maybe out of fear.

The last years

—especially since al-Sisi came to power in 2013—

I had found a way to balance saying what I want to say in the moment I want to say it, while staying “quite” safe, ensuring “relative” safety of my team.

But what were the prices we paid?

Defense mechanisms?

Nerves?

Less visibility?

Is that still possible now?

Is it worth it?

Standstill.  
Pounding heartbeat of anxiety.  
This is where I am now.  
This is what the failing to verbalize forced me to recognize.  
And utter now.

I remember until 2011 directing felt more difficult.  
The quest for perfection.  
That is the main virtue of seeing deaths, injuries.  
Engaging in physical violence.  
The adrenalin helps you accept.  
Art becomes again a fleeting moment.  
Or a series.  
Especially theater.  
A performance is again a fleeting moment.  
I was reminded.  
It is not held on paper.  
It will not stay.  
Even the version that travels through each attending memory cannot be controlled by the makers.  
It reminded me that it was not about being right.  
It was about that moment of sharing.  
Whatever the reason.  
But it is about that moment.  
More than anything else.

Which I think makes this discussion much more difficult.  
Because performance is not merely language.  
It is the emotion of the voice speaking it.  
More than the spoken word.  
The music of speech.  
And the music.  
The darkness and shadows more than the light.  
The bodies.  
Their actions and silence.  
Their mere presence in relation to whomever.  
Whatever.

But is the problem language or our reason to write?  
When the talk is about "closing the distance between language and our lives."  
It feels like too much might be expected.  
Of language.  
And of the writer.  
Or of ourselves as writers.

I think the secret to "creating from within" is reacting to the urge to engage.  
With those who might agree, but even more with those who might disagree.  
It is scary.  
And it only feels worthwhile if the urge has been strong.  
Honest.  
And the work truthful to the moment.  
To the feeling, the thought, the question, the hunch, the doubt . . .  
Insisting on making place for them in the public sphere.  
Not claiming any truth, any conclusion.

But stopping an opportunity to share.  
Insisting on our rights as citizens, as humans, to choice.  
To move forward, but also maybe to stand still.  
Together.

I think the secret to being on stage in that moment is not caring about being right.

I was raised in a house where the intellectual was viewed as the all-knowing God.  
The artist having to be an intellectual, should know!  
Have a further sight than your—average man—and certainly woman on the street with regard to  
politics, events, crises.  
Leading society in its resistance.  
The spirit of the sixties.

My father wrote thoughts.  
Opinions. Statements. Judgments.  
Resisted writing emotions, such as weakness or self-doubt.  
Only admitted fragility when he was cynical.  
But painting allowed him to be everything he could not be in writing.  
Finding comfort that he could always add another layer of paint.  
The next day.  
The next year.  
Whenever he wanted.  
He even had the trick of never signing a painting that was still in the studio.  
He comforted himself that it was not finished.

But how can that be the case with a published page?  
Unchangeable words.  
But what if they claim to be what they are?  
A product of the moment.  
A tiny incoherent piece of life.  
Rather than a coherent description of life.  
Rather than an explanation of an unexplainable life.  
I think that is only possible if the personal is not omitted.  
The attempt to create from inside experience is impossible.  
Unless the self is fully included.  
Transparent.  
Naked.  
As naked as one is able to be.  
In that given moment.  
As part of news.  
Against news.  
Maybe above news.  
Knowing even the tiny pieces of one life cannot be summarized in news.  
All these layers.  
All its sounds.  
All its images.  
The colors, the lack of colors.  
And all that our bodies experience.  
All that is indescribable within us.

I grew up hating that arrogance of the intellectual who claims he knows.  
The violence reminded me.

Humbled me.  
In my view of art.  
Of what I want to make.  
Violence made me feel helpless.  
It forced me to find ways to do the only thing I could do.  
Revolting against the mere thought of distance.  
Shitting on the knowledgeable overview.  
I think the closest to how I feel about all this is the difference between listening with my ears and listening with my whole body.  
The difference between listening safely still and listening while moving to the music.  
Not while playing as one of the instruments. Not while singing.  
But dancing I would argue.  
It is not a new metaphor.  
However I believe it is the closest to this attempted level of involvement.  
To this connection between the outer experience and the inner experience, and the expressing of that connection in the middle of it . . .  
But it takes crossing of boundaries to dance . . .  
What strength we have if we can dance together!  
Lately I have been thinking a lot about Sufi nights in Cairo.  
Going to as many as I can.  
Not because of the element of transcendence in them.  
But because of the layers that the experience entails.  
The chanted poetry.  
The speaking in between.  
The breathing patterns.  
The movements.  
The listening.  
The layering of those elements.  
As a collective attempt to stay in the moment.

Can we find a way to write while moving?  
Acting from within an experience?  
Not standing aside to watch?  
Or is it an impossible paradox?  
What if writers ignored that awaited wisdom?  
What if writing offered its questions and doubts with pride?  
What if it never apologized for the lack of answers?  
Would that lessen “the jetlag of critical work?”  
What if there was a way critical work did not have to be linear?  
What if it allowed itself to be erratic, emotional, avoiding distance?  
Would it still be considered “critical work?”  
What if written language found a way to embrace silences?  
What if writing and reading engaged the other senses?  
What if it managed to find a way to represent the multiplicity of layers of experience, of perception?

Time is ALWAYS so much shorter than we imagine.  
But I hoped we could have discussed those things cooking together.  
Focusing on not burning or chopping our fingers off or stepping on each other’s feet.  
I wish we could have gone together to an indoor Sufi night, catching our thoughts there, listening to the breathing, more than the singing, the silence before the sounds.  
Would that help us connect what we do with why and how we do it?

Because a good performance combines the past, the present, and the future in one moment.  
And that is how I want to live life and create work from within it.  
With that awareness.  
Without shields.  
With integrity.

A friend recently asked me but is there still a “within”?  
My answer is there is always a “within” to be lived in.  
So there must be one to be created from.  
That we can connect to what is within us.  
So that it connects to what is within the other who shares that space and that moment.

**Laila Soliman** is an independent theatre director and playwright. Her play “Egyptian Products” (2009) was published in the anthology *Plays from the Arab World* (2010), and her performance text “A Diary in Scenes: And don’t forget never to wear tampons at a revolution!” was published in *Theater der Zeit* (April 2011). This essay was originally published as a French translation in *Théâtre/Public* 233 (2019), <http://theatrepublic.fr/theatre-public-n233-scenes-politiques-du-maghrebau-moyen-orient-entretien-fred-moten/>.