Lead-In: Theatre in Egypt has always followed a stop and start pattern. This presents numerous problems to actors wanting to pursue a career on stage. A-U-C’s Adham Haddara examines the challenges actors face finding work in the theatre and what can be done to overcome them.

Mahmoud El Lozy: “I remember—I mean one my favorite parts was playing Mephistopheles in you know Goethe’s “Faust.” That was fun, playing the devil, you know seducing innocent women, girls, (laughter builds) and getting applauded for it at the end (laughter climaxes).” (00:01-00:18) (:17)

Leila Saad: “I would say, “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf,” uhh as Martha. I think that was one of the most challenging parts and the most exciting parts for me. Uhhm there have been many, many other favorites but this has been really, really exciting.” (00:18-00:38) (:20)

MUSIC: Show Must Go On (Instrumental) – Queen. Starts immediately on Leila Saad’s first ‘Really,’ at the 00:35 second mark; and plays underneath the sound bite until it ends at 00:38. Song gradually rises in volume after sound bite, then dips in volume and plays underneath the audio when narration comes in at 00:45 seconds.

That is how veteran stage actors Mahmoud El Lozy and Leila Saad fondly remember their time as actors. But unfortunately the same cannot be said for this generation of theatre actors in Egypt. (00:45-00:56) (:11)
Dalia El Guindy: “You-you-you go through so many ups and downs, there was so many moments where I just thought, that’s it, I’m never going to act again. I don’t even know why I’m doing this to myself and then I go back and-and-and restart.” (00:57-01:08) (:11)

Many Egyptian actors like Dalia El Guindy face common frustrations of trying to find work in the theatre in Egypt. Similarly, fellow graduates of The American University in Cairo, also known as A-U-C, have pursued careers in acting, only to run into problems of stagnation, not just in the profession, but in theatre as a whole. (01:09-01:28) (:19)

Mark Visona: “When I think of professional acting in Egypt I always think of this theatre that was right next to the old A-U-C campus; and for like three years I never saw the poster for the play change. It was the same play that they offered, every year, every time it was..I didn’t understand it, it was just the same play with the same..just this random comedy it seemed like and it was something that you know once it had become successful it just never changed and it seemed very static and kind of dead to me.” (01:29-01:56) (:27)

A-U-C graduate and actor Mark Visona recognizes the idleness in place on theatre. A state which Mahmoud El Lozy, a theatre professor at A-U-C, credits from a lack of cultural life in Egypt. (01:57-02:09) (:12)

MUSIC: Show Must Go On (Instrumental) – Queen fade out at 02:06.

Mahmoud El Lozy: “A cultural life, theatre means you have dozens of theatre in every city, big cities, putting on plays by new playwrights, with actors and directors and people saying ‘you know what are we going to see this week? And next week we’ll go and do
this,' and that it’s affordable and it’s food for thought it’s entertaining, it’s amusing, and it does something to you, it’s an outing.. right. Uhhh you don’t have that.” (02:09-02:37) (:28)

\textit{NAT SOUND: Rehearsal of El Nas Elli Taht (The People Downstairs). Nat Sound \textit{fades in} under Mahmoud El Lozy’s sound bite at the 02:15 mark and plays underneath the sound bite until it ends. Afterward, Nat Sound’s volume rises at 02:39 until narration begins at 02:49. From there Nat Sound dips in volume and gradually \textit{fades out} at the 02:54 mark.}

As we listen in on a rehearsal of \textit{El Nas Elli Taht} or \textit{The People Downstairs}, written by Noamaan Ashur and currently the new directing project of El Lozy; we are almost transported back to a time where Egypt once enjoyed a vibrant cultural life throughout the 50s and 60s, when it was a secular state. During that era the theatre flourished under Egypt’s first National Theatre; founded in 1921 and conveniently built in the heart of Downtown Cairo. (02:49-03:16) (:27)

\textit{NAT SOUND: Car whizzing by. Plays underneath narration at 03:11 on the word ‘Founded.’}

\textit{NAT SOUND: El Nas Elli Taht (The People Downstairs) \textit{cross fades in} from car whizzing by at 03:16 and \textit{fades out} at 3:26 before narration begins at 03:28.}

The National Theatre kept the country’s cultural pulse steady by introducing new plays; often staging and premiering the works of some of Egypt’s most renowned playwrights like Tawfiq Al Hakim, Alfred Farag, and Noamaan Ashur whose material challenged society, politics, religion, traditions, and ideals. (03:28-03:46) (:18)
All this changed during the 70s when theatre was attacked and charged as a communist conspiracy against Egyptian youth. Theatres were shutdown or completely re-formatted under heavy censorship to which the National Theatre slowly started to decline. (04:04-04:18) (:14)

Mahmoud El Lozy: “Uhhh the National Theatre died. National Theatre used to produce 18 plays a year and that number kept on going down, there were no playwrights so in a sense you know the National Theatre which is the theatrical consciousness of any nation you know where you maintain the heritage and the tradition disappeared.” (04:18-04:37) (:19)

But after years of stagnation and attacks on theatre, perhaps the greatest blow came in 2008 when the National Theatre caught fire; destroying the theatre’s main hall and defacing the outer walls of the building. Since then, several attempts to re-open the theatre have failed due to lack of budget. (04:38-04:56) (:18)

Leila Saad: “It burned down three years ago. Poor maintenance, fire fuse, to the ground. Then el Ataba this this uhh..National Theatre was the very first theatre founded in Egypt. ‘Zay’ (Like) the Opera House, the old Opera House. And they haven’t done a damn thing with it yet which breaks my heart, I acted on that stage.” (04:59-05:24) (:25)

MUSIC: Two Sunsets – Ludovico Einaudi fade out at 05:32.
MUSIC: Mr. Brightside (Instrumental) – The Killers, plays at 05:36. Music dips in volume when narration begins at 05:42 and gradually fades out at the 05:56 mark.

Tired of the lack of opportunities for actors, former actress and professor at A-U-C Leila Saad took the initiative and founded (along with two of her colleagues) The Alumni Community Theatre, known as ACT. (05:42-05:55) (:13)

NAT SOUND: Korba busy streets, walking up to ACT building, opening iron gate, sound of members of the organization rehearsing all play under narration at 05:58 and leads into Leila Saad’s sound bite at 06:17.

To learn more about the organization, I ventured down the busy streets of Korba in Heliopolis, found ACT’s headquarters, a beautiful old-fashioned villa with classic iron gates leading in, and spoke to Saad in a room separating us from members of the company in mid-rehearsal. (05:58-06:13) (:15)

Leila Saad: “There was a growing frustration of alums who wanted to pursue a passion, uhh but they’re no longer students, they have other jobs, they don’t want to work in the commercial theatre, and so we decided ok this will be an outlet for alums. A-U-C alums, not necessarily theatre majors, but those people who have a passion for theatre, who want to do theatre because this is something they love doing, in whatever capacity.” (06:17-06:44) (:27)

Since its establishment in 2009, ACT has produced several plays, performing on A-U-C’s Gerhart Stage, located on the university’s New Cairo Campus and off. Many of the plays cater to children, which as Saad describes has been well-received by the Egyptian community. ACT also
hosts numerous workshops for children throughout Cairo, introducing and teaching them the basics of acting and theatre. (06:45-07:09) (:24)

*MUSIC: Dies Irae – Nora Orlandi. Plays right after narration at 07:09. Volume of music remains low from the start and continues to play under audio.*

But while ACT gives its 60 members a place to grow and develop, most still can’t escape the social stigma that surrounds actors and the profession as ACT member Adham Zidan explains. (07:13-07:23) (:10)

*Adham Zidan: “There’s no respect for the actor, uhm there’s no concept in the field of what an actor actually does, there’s a concept of a celebrity, of a name, but as as as you are an actor they don’t understand what that means. For them a model could become an actor. Uhh they don’t understand the skills that are pertinent to that particular job.”* (07:24-07:46) (:22)

Social pressures coming from public, religious, and governmental sectors all restrict and heavily judge actors according to the roles they choose; assuming an actor is the role that he or she plays. As a result, an actor always has to be cautious when picking roles to avoid any kind of public backlash. Such social pressure can cripple an actor’s growth, by forcing them to accept safer roles; something El Guindy admits to doing herself. (07:47-08:13) (:26)

*El Guindy: “I’ve-I mean I’ve set boundaries for myself and I say I’m not... you know I will not cross specific boundaries and then uhm after that..I mean I don’t know, I guess every actor has to set their own boundaries of what they think they can handle or tolerate from society. And uhm ideally I would like to be able to do whatever it is I want and not have anybody judge me, but uhm unfortunately I am-I am living in Egypt and uhm..and*
I’m not strong enough to perhaps accept and... you know the out-lash of of people around me.” (08:14-08:48) (:34)

But why is the craft belittled and looked down on in Egyptian culture? Where an actor’s work is not taken seriously, but seen as a form of silly play rather than reflecting the truths about their respective society. (08:49-09:00) (:11)

El Guindy: “You’re always going to find people who don’t want to face the truth of what’s happening in their country. You’re going to find people who are scared because art touches a place that’s uhm maybe too emotional or spiritual, or uhm.. they don’t want op-you know go into these sort of you know areas in their lives or themselves, or discover anything about themselves and uhhm...and some just hate it because they want to do these things and they feel like that if they did they would be..they’d go to hell, so uh they won’t let anyone else do them.” (09:01-09:35) (:34)

MUSIC: Dies Irae – Nora Orlandi continues to play. Volume rises at 09:44 and continues to rise until music climaxes at 10:01 then fades out.

NAT SOUND: Vocal warm-up of One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest fades in at 10:03. Volume suddenly drops at 10:06 as narration begins; plays under narration and eventually fades out at the 10:10 mark.

Vocal warm-ups like these are essential for any actor as it frees up the throat and eliminates any muscle tension before a performance. But in order to have a performance there has to be a stage; which is another significant problem actors face, a lack of venues. Actors are pitted between going into commercial theatre owned by the government or independent theatre that suffers from a shortage of funds. (10:06-10:28) (:22)
Dalia El Guindy: “Uhmm of course independent theatre directors have no funding, have no theatres and uhmm we just get what we can..to you know, areas to perform. But if you work with government then you do get the venues, you get the funding, but you don’t necessarily get the quality that you would get in independent theatre, not all the time anyway.” (10:29-10:45) (:16)

Choosing the independent theatre life, El Guindy has performed in shoddy, rundown theatres and even in peoples’ homes to make ends meet. Zidan has also found ways to counter this problem, as he and fellow members of ACT perform in unconventional spaces. (10:46-11:00) (:14)

Adham Zidan: “We’ve performed in coffee shops, we’ve performed in uhmm like outdoor gardens, we’ve performed in somebody’s house, we’ve just performed anywhere that they’d allow us to perform cause that’s the only way to circumvent this lack of venues really, is to just make anywhere a venue. And theatre is great for that because really all you need is a bare stage and people.”(11:01-11:21) (:20)

Another pressing problem is little to no networking among actors. They are mostly left to fend for themselves, having no real representation or reliable casting agency to go to. (11:22-11:32) (:10)

Dalia El Guindy: “There’s no professional outlet for artists to be connected with each other I think; that’s a problem, that’s the biggest problem. And it’s also because a lot of people find it easier to work with people that they know, so you’ll find that some directors will work with a specific group of actors and will hardly ever change because they trust them, they know them and ‘khalas’(It’s over) that’s it you know. It’s easier to
do that than to work with people they’ve never met before because they’d be taking a risk and it’s a waste of money so.” (11:33-12:02) (:29)

Faced with several overwhelming obstacles, much needs to be improved. Both El Guindy and Zidan believe an online portal directing traffic would give actors a better sense of where and when to go to an audition rather than relying on pure chance and connections. They also see an urgent need to fully revamp current theatre, ridding it of all commercial comedies and replacing it with interesting, material, that stimulates Egyptian society; a feat that seems unlikely to El Lozy under the Muslim Brotherhood. (12:02-12:30) (:28)

Mahmoud El Lozy: “I think that there’s going to be a sense of you know, a growing sense of attempts, you know at intimidating people in all sorts of ways..you know to silence people. And uhh.. I mean we’re already seeing that I mean it’s..so it’s not going to be good. It’s definitely not going to be good.” (12:31-12:50) (:19)

Saad also shares El Lozy’s sentiment of the unpredictability of the current regime; and is filled with her own doubts, as she gives a firm La’eh, the Arabic word for ‘No,’ to seeing significant change in Egyptian Theatre. (12:51-13:04) (:13)

Leila Saad: “La’eh la’eh la’eh (No, No, No), around then, I will be dead. And if it happens, you can come visit my grave and say, ‘hey, it’s happened, sorry you’re not here.” (13:04-13:15) (:11)

Volume remains low from the start and continues to play under audio.
But not all is lost. Visona adds a shimmer of hope as he feels the root of restoring theatre to its full glory rests in the Egyptian community itself, an area he feels has gone unnoticed for far too long. (13:16-13:28) (:12)

Mark Visona: “If you involve the community in the process of making some kind of theatre then I feel like uhhm on the national level, the prominence of theatre would rise quite a bit. And if there was some kind of an effort to you know really involve communities that wouldn’t normally be exposed to theatre, I think that that would help the overall kind of demand in the long term change from you know commercialism to quality.” (13:29-13:52) (:23)

No matter the outcome, Visona, El Guindy, and Zidan strongly encourage struggling actors to persist with their craft. To seize what opportunities they can, especially if they’re still in university. And ultimately to be comforted by the fact that as long as they’re making meaningful theatre happen, it may blur and fizzle, but it won’t completely fade out. (13:53-14:13) (:20)

MUSIC: Telephone Line (Intrusmenta) – E.L.O. continues to play after narration and fades out at the 14:17 mark.

Credits:

My deepest thanks to A-U-C Theatre Professor Mahmoud El Lozy, ACT Artistic Director Leila Saad, A-U-C Graduate and Actress Dalia El Guindy, A-U-C Graduate and Actor Mark Visona, and A-U-C Graduate and ACT member Adham Zidan; for sharing their experiences and lending their voices to the making of this documentary.

Songs used in this documentary are:

1. The Show Must Go On (Instrumental) by Queen
2. Two Sunsets by Ludovico Einaudi
3. Mr. Brightside (Instrumental) by The Killers
4. Dies Irae by Nora Orlandi
5. Telephone Line (Instrumental) by E-L-O
6. Zay El Hawa by Omar Khairat

Natural Sound of One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest vocal warm-up was taken from The AdhamCenter’s YouTube Channel

This documentary was produced and presented by Adham James Haddara. Thank you for listening. (14:22-15:14) (:52)

*MUSIC: Zay El Hawa – Omar Khairat, fades out at the 15:20 mark.*

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