

**OSMANLI ARAŐTIRMALARI  
VII-VIII**

**EDITORS OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE  
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**THE JOURNAL OF OTTOMAN STUDIES  
VII-VIII**

**İstanbul - 1988**

## LEYLĀ - THE FIRST EGYPTIAN TRAGEDY

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In the summer of 1872 the first Egyptian tragedy *Laylā* or *Nuzhat al-Adab fī Shajā'at al-'Arab al-Mubhija li'l-A'yun al-Zakiya fī Ḥadiqat al-Azbakiya* (*A Diversion in Literature on the Bravery of the Arabs to Gladden the Bright Eyes in the Garden of al-Azbakiya*)<sup>1</sup> was performed in al-Azbakiya gardens in Cairo, written by Muḥammad 'Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Miṣrī, Shaykh at the Islamic university of al-Ahzar. Drama was still a relatively new genre amongst the indigenous population of the Ottoman Empire. In Istanbul and Smyrna there had been a tradition of European theatre amongst the foreign community going back to the 17th Century. In Egypt there had been amateur and professional European dramatic activities in Cairo and Alexandria starting with the occupation by the French expedition (1798-1801) and irregularly since the 1820s. From the 1840s Istanbul and Cairo entertained visiting companies of Italian opera, and by the 1850s both cities had a number of theatres, yet despite all this activity for a long time there was little or no imitation of European drama by the local population.

There had been a long tradition of popular drama in the East, of improvised bawdy burlesques, rustic farces, and of puppet and shadow theatre (*Karagoz* or *Khayāl al-ẓill*), but it was not till 1810 that there had been any attempt at drama in the European tradition. In that year the Armenian community in Istanbul put on amateur theatricals<sup>2</sup>. The inspiration of European theatre and opera was

1 This play has passed unnoticed by scholars. Only one copy of it seems to have survived in the British Library (14582 c. 19 (3)).

2 For early developments in the Ottoman theatre, see Metin And, *A History of Theatre and Popular Entertainment in Turkey*, Ankara. 1963-1964.

evident in many of these early experiments. The French classics were a major source. In 1847 Turkish translations of Molière were presented before Sultan 'Abd al-Majīd, and this French dramatist's works were also to influence the plays of the first Arab playwright, the Syrian Mārūn al-Naqqāsh, whose first play was performed in the same year in Beirut. Early Turkish and Arab playwrights were also familiar with the works of Racine, and Shaykh 'Abd al-Fattāḥ was equally indebted to European drama. In the period between 1869 and 1871 several Molière plays were translated into Turkish and published in Istanbul.

Though the Ottoman province of Egypt had a longer continuous history of European theatre than Syria, its own Arab theatre did not commence till 1870 or 1871, just a couple of years after the foundation of the Théâtre Ottoman and the first performances of original Turkish plays in Istanbul. Khedive Ismā'īl, the Egyptian viceroy, like his predecessors, may have kept a weather eye on developments in the capital, and the birth of Ottoman theatre may have been one of the factors prompting him to not only subvent the European theatre, but also to assist budding Arab dramatists. The whole area of cultural ties between the two cities of Istanbul and Cairo is still unexplored ground.

While the port of Alexandria had four European theatres, the Rossini, Zizinia, Vittorio Alfieri and the Vittorio Emmanuele, the capital Cairo in the late 1860s still had only café-concerts. As part of his plans to «Parisify» and prepare the city to entertain the European nobility invited for the grand opening of the Suez Canal, Ismā'īl brought European spectacle to Cairo on a grand scale. In 1869 in Ezbekieh (al-Azbakiya) square he financed the construction of the Théâtre Français or the Théâtre de la Comédie for the exclusive use of French dramatic companies, paid for the building of the French Cirque Rancy and for the Théâtre Khédivial de l'Opera for Italian opera, as well as subsidising the companies that were to appear there; a regular opera season had been staged in Istanbul since 1866. This expansion of European theatre was accompanied by an increase in the number of Egyptians attending performances, particularly amongst the Turkish (dhawāt) and Egyptian (wujūh

and a'yān) gentry<sup>3</sup> and courtiers. Though many courtiers and members of the educated élite knew French and Italian, languages taught in the state schools, the number of these Arabs or Turks who could follow an operatic or theatrical production with ease must have been limited; subsequently there was a spate of Arabic and even Turkish translations of libretti in Egypt in 1869 and 1870.

The Khedive's subventions to the European theatre may have led Shaykh 'Abd al-Fattāh's friend, the Egyptian Jew James Sanua, to believe that the ruler would be equally as generous in support of a proposal for Arabic drama. Sanua, a teacher and journalist, may have had ties with the court through his earlier position as tutor to the children<sup>4</sup> of the court and the Khedive. A regular spectator at the open-air café concerts in the gardens of Azbakīya, where he saw French and Italian troupes performing in the summer of 1870, he was prompted to try his own hand at play-writing. Sanua formed his own troupe from his male students, giving performances perhaps initially in private; the Khedive himself attended some of these<sup>5</sup>. Being advised to reach a wider audience he got permission for a performance to be given in the summer of 1870 at the Khedivial Théâtre - Concert du Jardin de l'Ezbekieh<sup>6</sup>, a theatre which had probably been constructed in the garden that year. This theatre was exclusively used for open-air performances in the hot and sultry Cairo summers. Sanua's plays, contemporary domestic comedies, were enthusiastically received, and it is reported no doubt based on his own recollections, that hundreds of performances were given over the next two years<sup>7</sup>; unfortunately there are few contemporary reports on these performances. 'Abd al-Fattāh, in the preface to his own play, acknowledges that Sanua was responding

3 *al-Jawā'ib* newspaper, Istanbul), no. 513, 12 April 1871.

4 For Sanua's biography see Irene Gendzier, *The Practical Visions of Ya'qub Sanu'*, Cambridge, 1966.

5 «An Arabic Punch», *The Saturday Review*, vol. 48, no. 1, 26 July, 1879, 112.

6 Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, (Washington, 1983), p. 45.

7 Jacques Chelley, «Le Molière Egyptien», *Abū Naḍḍāra*, no. 7, September 1906.

to a growing public demand for Arab theatre; «people before him were upset because it (Arab theatre) did not exist, until he demonstrated his outstanding zeal, and began his works<sup>8</sup>». Sanua's pioneering work was the guiding light for many others; 'Abd al-Fattāḥ wrote that with the advent of Sanua's theatre, «the dawn came and after I saw those compositions, I decided to follow in his excellent tracks<sup>9</sup>». Some of the Arab plays presented in the short-lived period of Arab theatre in Cairo were put on as a cooperative venture by the *Jam'iyat Ta'sīs al-Tiyātrāt al-'Arabīya* (The Society for the Establishment of Arabic Plays)<sup>10</sup>. Sanua may have been president of this group: 'Abd-al-Fattāḥ refers to «our friend the president (*al-ra'īs*), the esteemed James (Jams), who has composed the best of this art, more than twelve (plays)»<sup>11</sup>.

Several translations were brought to Sanua to be performed by his company. Sanua recalled that «quand j'avais mon théâtre du Caire dans la même semaine, on vint m'apporter, pour être jouées les traductions de *L'Avare*, du *Malade Imaginaire* du *Tartuffe*»<sup>12</sup>. The last two translations of Molière were from the pen of Muḥammad 'Uthmān Jalāl. Abū 'l-Su'ūd, translator of Molière's *L'Avare*<sup>13</sup>, was editor of *Wādī al-Nīl* newspaper, and had already rendered into Arabic the libretto of Verdi's *Aïda*, the opera commissioned by Khedive Ismā'īl. His press was to publish Jalāl's «Egyptianisation» of *Tartuffe*, *al-Ṣhaykh Maḥlūf* in 1290/1873-4. Jalāl, a translator in the Diwān al-Jihādīya (Ministry of Defence) had also translated libretti. In the summer of 1871 the Arabic fortnightly educational magazine, *Rawḍat al-Madāris al-Miṣrīya*, organ of the Ministry of Education, published part of the text of his version of Molière's *Le Medecin Malgré Lui*, entitled *al-Fakḥkh al-Mansūb li'l-Ḥakīm al-*

8 Muḥammad 'Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Miṣri *Nuzhat al-Adab fi Shajā'at al-'Arab al-Mubḥija li 'l-A'yun al-Zakiya fi Ḥadiqat al-Azbakiya*, (Cairo, 1289/1872), p. 3.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Wādī al-Nīl* (newspaper, Cairo) quoted in *al-Jawā'ib*, no. 537, 27 August, 1871.

11 'Abd al-Fattāḥ, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

12 Paul de Baignières, *L'Egypte Satirique*, (Paris, 1886) p. 12.

13 Jules Barbier, *L'Ezbékiah* (Cairo theatrical paper) 1873 quoted in James Sanua, *L'Aristocratica Alessandria*, (Cairo, 1875) p. IX.

*Maghsūb (The Trap for the Coerced Doctor)*<sup>14</sup>. Some years later Jalāl published some of these translations and other adaptations into Egyptian colloquial of the works of Racine and Molière.

Not satisfied with these comedies, the audience at the Arab theatre became more discriminating, demanding to see «serious» works, so several such works were translated to satisfy the public demand<sup>15</sup>. 'Abd al-Fattāh's play *Laylā*, may have been written in response to this demand. Having written it, he «showed it to him (Sanua) and to those conversant in its vocabulary and its form. They were glad with it, and their heart(s) liked what it contained...»<sup>16</sup> A contemporary Cairo journal records that Sanua received one day a tragedy in Arabic verse written by an Azhari Shaykh, no doubt his play, which was considered so «excellent» that it was subsequently performed<sup>17</sup>. Sanua, Jalāl and Abū'l-Su'ūd may have been amongst those who helped 'Abd al-Fattāh produce the final polished version. The play was presented to Isma'il Pasha al-Şiddiq, the Egyptian Finance Minister, more popularly known as the *Mu-fattish* «because the commencement of this art (was) with his help...»<sup>18</sup> The Pasha had been patron of the Society for the Establishment of Arabic Plays<sup>19</sup>; other influential courtiers, such as Khayrī Pasha, Keeper of the Seals, had assisted Sanua, facilitating the success of his early experiments.

Little is known of Shaykh Muhammad 'Abd al-Fattāh. When he wrote the play he was a student<sup>20</sup> at al-Azhar. Unlike Sanua, Abū'l-Su'ūd and Jalāl, he does not appear to be a product of the modern education system. Both Jalāl and Abū'l-Su'ūd had been students in Rifā'a Rāfi' al-Ṭahṭāwī's School of Languages (*Madrasat al-Ālsun*). All three were familiar with French. Jalāl knew

14 *Rawḍat al-Madāris al-Miṣriya*, (Cairo) y 2, no. 3, Friday 15 ṣafar, 1288 (5 May 1871) pp. 1-4; no. 5, Saturday 15 Rabī' I (3 June 1871), pp. 5-8; no. 7, Monday 15 Rabī' II (4 July 1871) pp. 9-12.

15 Chelley, *op. cit.*

16 'Abd al-Fattāh, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

17 Sanua, *ibid.*

18 'Abd al-Fattāh, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

19 *Wādī al-Nīl* quoted in *al-Jawā'ib*, no. 537, 27 August. 1871.

20 Chelley, *op. cit.*, no. 6. August, 1906, p. 25 and others describe him as a professor.

both English and Turkish and they all were probably well read in the literature of these languages. The traditionally conservative al-Azhar may not have opposed 'Abd al-Fattāh's experiment for at the time the university was under a more enlightened leadership, that of Shaykh Muḥammad al-'Abbāsī al-Mahdī, who was attempting to blend together the currents of modernism and tradition<sup>21</sup>. 'Abd al-Fattāh seems to have spent his subsequent career in teaching. In 1881, he was director (*Nāzir*) of al-Jamāliya (?) School, Cairo<sup>22</sup>, and later in 1892-93/1310 he was a teacher of Arabic (al-'ulūm al-'arabīya) in the European schools<sup>23</sup>.

His first publication in 1286/1869-70 and apparently his most popular work<sup>24</sup>, a treatise for students, *Kitāb Tuḥfat Ūlī al-Albāb fī Majālis al-Aḥbāb* (*The Precious Object for those with Intelligence in the Councils of the Lovers*) was dedicated «to my friend in certainty and opinion and my companion in art and craft Mr. Jams Sānū (James Sanua)»; it contained twelve chapters with discourses, maxims, proverbs, solutions to problems etc. and was published by the Castelli press<sup>25</sup>. He brought out a similar work of poetry, witticisms, advice and poems in *raḡaz* (*arāḡīz*) in 1292/1875 *Uṣūl al-Adab wa-Ma'dan al-Dhahab* (*The Principles of Literature and the Mine of Gold*). He later wrote two works of fiction: a tale, *Kitāb al-Sabk wa'l-Lahaj al-Mutaḍammīn li-Sirat al-Sayyid Ḥaḍhanbal wa-Bint 'Ammihī Zalkūna wa-mā Jarā Lahu fī Siyāḥatihi* (*The Book of Formulation and Attachment Containing the Story of Sayyid Ḥaḍhanbal and his Cousin Zalkūna and what Happened to Him on His Trip*) Cairo 1876/1293<sup>26</sup>, and a short story - *Najāḥ al-Sayyid Ḡhandūr wa-Kḥiyānat al-Uṣṭā Tarṭūr wā-Ṣan'at Hikmat* (*The*

21 Gendzier, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

22 *al-Ahrām* (newspaper, Alexandria) 19 November 1881.

23 *al-Maktaba al-Azhariya, Fihris al-Maktaba al-Azhariya* (Cairo, 1949) vol. 5, p. 41.

24 There were further additions of this 52 page work in 1305/1887-88, 1310/1892-93, 1311/1893-94 and 1314/1896-97.

25 *al-Maktaba al-Azhariya, op. cit.*, vol. 5, p. 42.

26 Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur* (Leiden, 1938), Supplement II, 736 calls it *al-Sabk wa'l-Lahaj al-Mutaḍammīn li-Sirat al-Sayyid Ḥaḍhanbal wa-Bint 'Ammihī Zalkūna (w-mā Jarā Lahu fī Siyāḥatihi)* with a date of 1283/1866-67.

*Success of Sayyid Ghandūr and the Treachery of Master Tartūr and the Skill of Hikmat*) in Cairo, 1878. A description of an evening of ballet on 19 Muḥarram 1292/25 February 1875 was published in Cairo, *al-Durra al-Yatima li'l Ghāwī fi Kayfiyat Rasm al-Balū* (*The Pairless Pearl for One Wishing to Know How to Describe Ballet*) and *Samīr al-Rukkāb fi'l-Ḥawādith wa'l-Nawādir wa'l-Al'āb* (*The Night Narrator of the Riders in Novelties, Witticisms and Games*) in Cairo, 1328/1910-11<sup>27</sup>. He contributed a «nouvelle arabe» in French to Léon Leoncavallo's *Album Littéraire* in 1881<sup>28</sup> and one of his poems to Sultan 'Abd al-Hamīd appeared in Sanua's magazine *al-Tawaddud* in Paris in 1897<sup>29</sup>. His play, *Laylā* was first published in early Ṣafar 1289/mid-April 1872<sup>30</sup>. It was printed by Giacomo Castelli at the Castelli press in Cairo at the expense of the author. It was advertised for sale in the local press; indeed this short advertisement is the first mention of the new Arabic theatre in the official gazette, *al-Waqā'ir al-Miṣriya*. Copies of the play were available for one franc from the home of the author in the Frank quarter of al-Muskī, near the premises of the merchant Mr. Kamwārih (sic). Customers were advised to call between one and five o'clock. The advert explained the reasons for printing the play : -

«In the reign of His Highness, the Khedive, mankind has made progress in civilisation (*tamaddun*), until (Egypt) has attained more than previous nations (*umam*). One of the manifestations of civilisation is the existence of plays (*tiyātrāt*), especially in the (appearance) of the Arab Theatre (*al-tiyātrū al-'Arabī*), now performing in the garden of al-Azbakiya. Since everyone is praising the attainment of civilisation, we started printing a play (*lu'ba*), and pub-

27 Carlo Alfonso Nallino, *L'Arabo Parlato in Egitto*, (Milan, 1913) pp. 484-485.

28 *Moniteur Egyptien* (newspaper, Alexandria) 8 May, 1881.

29 *al-Tawaddud*, no. 7, October 1897.

30 Brockelmann, *op. cit.*, S. II, p. 736 wrongly gives a much earlier date of 1283/1866-67 and is also mistaken about the title, *Nazrat al-Adab fi Shajā'at al-'Arab al-Mubhiya li'l-A'yun al-Zakiya fi Hadiqat al-Azbakiya*.



lished it for (the benefit) of all who love the homeland (*wajān*), in order to increase civilisation»<sup>31</sup>.

The play was performed on the stage used by Sanua, the Théâtre-Concert de l'Ezbékīyah<sup>32</sup> in the summer of 1872<sup>33</sup>. The play was presented before an audience including Egyptian ministers, many ulema and poets<sup>34</sup>, to celebrate the opening of al-Azbakīya gardens for the summer season<sup>35</sup>. The theatre in the gardens operated only in the summer season. The Cirque, Comédie and Opera House were only open from about mid-September until mid-March or early April. The play obtained a legitimate success<sup>36</sup> and was put on more than twice by public demand.

According to the Cairo theatrical paper, *L'Ezbékīeh*<sup>37</sup>, it was performed by Shaykhs, presumably students, from al-Azhar, no doubt friends of 'Abd al-Fattāh<sup>38</sup>. This was indeed a novelty, for there is no other record in the 1870s or early 1880s of Azharites being involved in the theatre, and certainly no plays are believed to have been performed at the university. The first well known Muslim actor in Egypt was Shaykh Salāma Hījāzī, who first appeared on the Egyptian stage in 1882. Sanua had expanded his troupe to include actresses, probably Christians or Jews, but it may have still been unthinkable for a Muslim scholar, like 'Abd al-Fattāh, to countenance the appearance of women on the stage. Since the female parts in his play were played by young men from al-

31 *al-Waqā'if al-Miṣriya*, no. 455, 7 May, 1872.

32 Ibrahim 'Abduh, *Abū Naẓẓāra*, (Cairo, 1953), p. 32 incorrectly calls it the National Theatre (*al-Tiyātrū al-Wajānī*): There was no theatre with this name.

33 Chelley, *op. cit.*, wrongly gives 1873 as the date of the performance.

34 Chelley, *op. cit.*, and James Sanua, *Ma Vie en Vers et mon Theatre en Prose*, (Paris, 1912) p. 11 quoted in Najwā Ibrāhīm Fu'ād 'Anūs, *Masrah Ya'qūb Ṣanu'*, (Cairo, 1984) p. 71.

35 *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft*, 1879, p. 609.

36 Sanua, *L'Aristocratica*, p. IX.

37 Sanua, *ibid* p. IX.

38 Gendzier, *op. cit.*, p. 36 believes the play was performed by Sanua's troupe, quoting Anwar Lūqā «Masrah Ya'qūb Ṣanu'», *al-Majalla*, y 5, no. 51, March 1961, p. 59 and Sanua's unpublished *Memoires*, p. 6.

Azhar, 'Abd al-Fattāḥ had licence to have his two female characters, the heroine Laylā and her nurse Su'dā, lifting their veils on stage when they are alone.

Laylā : «Raise (your) veil»

Su'dā : «That is all right, because your father is coming after a while and it is not right that I should stand before him with my face disclosed»<sup>39</sup>

The play was performed at least twice. The playbill from the second performance carried the formula «by public demand», which led the correspondent of the French *Le Nil* paper to think it must be popular. It seems that plays had a short life at al-Azbakiya theatre, barely enough time for European critics to decide whether to attend or not :-

«Le temps de réfléchir, et j'ai bien peur que *Leyla* ne disparaisse de l'affiche (les pieces sont vite, au théâtre de l'Esbekeyeh) auquel cas, j'en serai réduit à rediger mon compte rendu sur le brochure, toute bonne tragédie devant naturellement recevoir les honneurs de l'impression».

The critic could not make up his mind. At a time of the year when one was constantly using one's handkerchief to dry the sweat from the brow, he thought it perhaps imprudent to impose an additional burden, that of drying the tears of his eyes<sup>40</sup>.

This short play (*la'b*) has only eight scenes and is forty-seven pages long, with five principal characters (*ashkhas al-la'b*) Emir Zaydān, Laylā his daughter, al-Shātir Ḥasan - Leylā's cousin and lover, Su'dā her nurse and Emir 'Imrān - rival for her hand) and non-speaking extras representing a party of riders from 'Imrān's tribe. The play begins with Laylā impatiently awaiting the return of her lover, the young warrior Ḥasan, who has been promised her hand in marriage, providing he leads Laylā's tribe to victory over a hostile neighbouring tribe. The first few scenes (*manzar*) add little to the plot and are devoid of action. In scene two Zaydān informs his daughter that Ḥasan is returning victorious. Ḥasan re-

39 'Abd al-Fattāḥ, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.

40 *Le Nil*, (Alexandria), no. 21, Tuesday 25 June, 1872, p. 2.

turns in scene three to claim Laylā's hand, giving the girl and her nurse a detailed but hardly enthralling account of his forty-day campaign. Laylā's father, Zaydān, announces in the following scene that the nuptials will take place that night. Next news of impending disaster disturbs the joy of the previous scene : Ḥasan announces the arrival of Emir 'Imrān, a sinister, feared and suspicious relative, whom Laylā has already rejected as a suitor.

On his arrival, Emir Zaydān explains to 'Imrān that his daughter is already promised and that he must keep his word. The newcomer does not consider this an impediment, offering to the young general in exchange for Laylā his young and beautiful sister, whose hand has been sought by many a nobleman. Zaydān's refusal puts the visitor in a foul temper, and he storms out. This is according to the printed text, but when the play was performed the plot may have been slightly changed. The correspondent of *Le Nil* gives a different version describing how the father thinks with reason that 'Imrān's suggestion should be presented to the interested parties; this he does, though they reject the idea unanimously<sup>41</sup>.

'Imrān, the rival for Laylā's hand had brought a large armed escort, two thousand men, whom he had left hidden behind a nearby mountain. These troops attack Zaydān's tribe who are still exhausted from their recent victories. This battle is heard taking place off stage. In the final scene Ḥasan stands fettered on the stage, his men having been routed. The new conqueror gives Laylā a choice :-

'Imrān : «Accept me as your husband, and I will hand him over to you with the other prisoners»<sup>42</sup>

Laylā energetically refuses him, so 'Imrān stabs Ḥasan to death with a dagger. Laylā is in a state of total despair, having mourned her dear departed, she gives the impression of regaining her reason. Much to the surprise of her father and nurse, she feigns acceptance of 'Imrān as her husband, but at the moment of their embrace,

<sup>41</sup> *Le Nil*, no. 23, Tuesday, 9 July 1872.

<sup>42</sup> 'Abd al-Fattāh, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

she stabs him to death with a dagger, hidden in her belt. She loses all strength after this and falls into a state of deep depression.

Life becomes insupportable, so she kills herself with the same dagger. The play ends with Zaydān resolving to pass the rest of his days in a tent near their graves. Only consideration for the mourners prevents him from taking his own life.

All these murders were too much for the Cairo audience, who really believed that the actors had been killed:-

«Le naïf populaire qui assiste à la représentation habitué qu'il est aux mariages par lesquels M. James a coutumé de clôre toutes ses pièces, et ne comprenant rien à ces homicides et à ce suicide (il croit que c'est arrivé!...) s'en va requérir la force armée, dans la personne des municipaux de service au jardin. Ils arrivent au moment où le père, entouré des trois cadavres<sup>43</sup>, se lamente sur son malheureux sort et se plaint de n'avoir personne pour le défendre contre la soldatesque ivre de sang, et de vengeance, qui est sur le point de lui faire un mauvais parti - Eh bien! ne sommes-nous pas là; s'écrie le chef de la garde urbaine - La toile tombe, l'étonnement est à son comble, et les spectateurs, pour en avoir le coeur net, demandent d'une seule voix, une seconde représentation de Layla pour le lendemain»<sup>44</sup>.

A wag in the audience had whispered to the police, demanding to know if they were pleased to see these crimes being committed in front of them. Amid the jeers, laughter and applause of the spectators, two newly assigned policemen jumped on the stage and arrested the murderer, the actor who was playing the tyrant, 'Im-rān. The policeman were Ṣa'īdīs<sup>45</sup> (i.e. from Upper Egypt). Ṣa'īdīs are often depicted in Egyptian fiction as naive people.

43 Sanua's memory seems to have played him tricks for he incorrectly recalls that four sons of the tribal chief are killed in the final scene-Sanua, *Ma Vie*, p. 13 in 'Anūs *op. cit.*, p. 42.

44 *Le Nil*, no. 23, Tuesday, 9 July, 1872, p. 2.

45 Sanua, *Ma Vie*, *op. cit.*

The play was enthusiastically received by the correspondent of *Le Nil*. The paper noted that Shaykh 'Abd al-Fattāh had belied the assertion that tragedy was a genre long dead and buried<sup>46</sup>. Three deaths were thought to be a respectable figure for a play in three acts<sup>47</sup>. The French writer poked fun at 'Abd al-Fattāh for not realising with his three act work that at least five acts were really needed<sup>48</sup>; the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, were usually divided into five acts. The printed text of the play is not divided into acts. Following the conventions of European theatre, the action is confined in the main to one place and time; only in the final scene does the action move to outside the tent of Prince Zaydān to find Ḥasan standing in chains, thus requiring a break in the performance. The beginning and end of most other scenes are signalled by the arrival or departure of the characters.

In the Greek tradition of tragedy, there are no sub-plots and little character development for its own sake. The characters are markedly one-dimensional. Laylā's overriding characteristic is her love for Ḥasan. An aura of potential disaster transcends the work. In scene one Laylā tells of a disturbing nightmare in which she had seen Ḥasan lying on the ground, swimming in his blood. Tragedy seems to overshadow her family: Laylā and her father sadly recall Laylā's late mother in scene two. Prince Zaydān later remarks about the death of his brother, Ḥasan's father<sup>49</sup>. Even the nurse Su'dā has lost her husband, Abū Khalīl. Little action, apart from the final scene, disturbs the narrative, and unlike Shakespeare there is no background of ordinary life to detract from the plot.

The Senecan precept of tragedy is adhered to, that of reminding men of the mutability of fortune, the fickleness of fortune bringing down persons of high degree from a state of prosperity and happiness into one of adversity. Though the setting is pre-Islamic with tribes battling and the division of spoils, the Islamic ideas of fate (*dahr*) and predestination are omnipresent.

46 Despatch dated 17 June in *Le Nil*, no. 21, Tuesday 25 June, 1872.

47 *Le Nil*, no. 23, Tuesday 9 July 1872.

48 *Ibid*, no. 21, Tuesday, 25 June 1872.

49 'Abd al-Fattāh, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

Zaydān : «We can only submit to what the effective creator has foreordained»<sup>50</sup>

Fate is responsible but not blamed for the tragic ending, and Prince Zaydān accepts God's decree that led to these deaths<sup>51</sup>. The Azharite author ignores, perhaps not to offend his Muslim audience, the polytheistic *Jāhiliyya* setting of his work and fills it with references to a Muslim God. The nurse utters the invocation «God willing» (in *shā'a-llāh*)<sup>52</sup>. Hasan's battle with the other tribes is called a *jihād* (holy war), and Su'dā talks of her husband dying as «a martyr (*shahīd*) for God»<sup>53</sup>. There are other anomalies; in what is presumably an illiterate society, there are many references to books, pens and writing:-

Su'dā : «Truly this story will be written in gold wash»<sup>54</sup>.

Su'dā serves coffee<sup>55</sup>; 'Abd al-Fattāḥ may not have been aware that coffee was probably first used in the Arab world in the 16th Century.

Following in the footsteps of the popular folk literature of the story-tellers, the tales of Banī Hilāl, 'Antara and Abū Zayd, the author evokes an image of the noble and chivalrous Arab. Hasan's bravery and skill as a fighter are praised. His victory in the recent campaign is remarkable even in fictional terms : his forces lose forty men, whilst the enemy loses four thousand. In the final scene completely surrounded by 'Imrān's forces, he manages to kill some of them before being captured. In a last show of courage, in yet another convention from European drama, he manages though mortally wounded to utter a few lines of verse to his beloved. In contrast, 'Imrān is condemned for his treachery and cowardice :

Zaydān : «You are not an Arab, because these actions are only done by evil men. Arabs are not thus»<sup>56</sup>.

50 *Ibid*, p. 12.

51 *Ibid*, Scene VIII, p. 46.

52 *Ibid*, p. 10.

53 *Ibid*, Scene III, p. 26.

54 *Ibid*, Scene III, p. 26.

55 *Ibid*, Scene III, p. 19.

56 *Ibid*, Scene VIII, p. 40.

The play is written in a mixture of poetry, *sajf* (rhymed prose) and prose. Most of the longer speeches are in verse and *sajf*. Verse is preferred when the characters express the intensity of their feelings, *sajf* where the development of the narrative and the imparting of information necessitate a less rigid metre. Verse is employed by Laylā to explain her insomnia and love for Ḥasan; by her father when he recalls his late wife and brother<sup>57</sup>, by Ḥasan expressing the strength of his own feeling for Laylā<sup>58</sup>, and even by the evil 'Imrān showing his passion for her<sup>59</sup>. The short speeches are nearly all in prose, and so are the scenes where the pace of the narrative is faster, and thus less suitable to verse.

Not all the poetry was by 'Abd al-Fattāh. When Ḥasan describes how the thought of Laylā inspired him in battle he appropriately borrows the words of the black knight 'Antara b. Shaddād addressing his beloved 'Abla : -

«And surely I remembered you, when the lances were drinking my blood, and the bright swords of India were dripping with my blood. I wished to kiss the swords, for verily they shone as bright as the flash of the foretooth of your smiling mouth»<sup>60</sup>. (Lines 41 and 42).

Our Arab author was also indebted to European literature. The correspondent to *Le Nil* felt the play was based «neither more nor less»<sup>61</sup> on Voltaire's *Méropé* (written 1743). 'Abd al-Fattāh may have borrowed some of the plot, but drew the line at attempting to mimic or plagiarise Voltaire's lines or Egyptianising any of his characters. The unpleasant 'Imrān endeavours to marry Laylā in the same way that in *Méropé* the tyrant of Messene, Polyphonte, tries to force a reluctant Méropé, widow of King Cresphonte, to marry him to give his government legitimacy. Laylā finally agrees to marry 'Imran to save the life of Ḥasan, just as Méropé accepts Polyphonte to prevent the killing of her son, Égisthe. Both evil men die at the hands

57 *Ibid.* Scene V.

58 *Ibid.*, Scene III, p. 22.

59 *Ibid.*, Scene VIII, p. 41.

60 Capt. F.E. Johnson, *The Seven Poems*, Bombay, 1893, p. 181.

61 *Le Nil*, no. 21, Tuesday 25 June, 1872.

of their victims; Polyphonte is killed at his wedding by Égisthe, 'Imrān by Laylā. 'Imrān dies for killing his rival Ḥasan, Polyphonte for killing Cresphonte, Mérope's husband. A blood bath brings both works to an end; in *Mérope* this occurs when Polyphonte, his companion Érox and others are killed at the wedding ceremony.

The play is primarily in classical Arabic, in a relatively simple language that would have been accessible to the new audience of the Arab theatre. But no doubt influenced by Sanua and Jalāl, 'Abd al-Fattāḥ sprinkles his text with colloquial. Many forms from the Egyptian dialect are used : nouns such as *uṣṭa* (master), *'izba* (farm), *barrā* (outside); some colloquial verbs *aṣḥūf* (I see), *fuddnā min dhālika* (let's drop that), *wahaṣṭinī kathīr<sup>an</sup> qawīy<sup>an</sup>* (I missed you a lot); some interrogatives *a'mīl ayyh?* (What shall I do?), *ayy dī?* (what's this?); the negative *mā ihsibūshī* (I didn't think); some lengthened and shortened verbal endings *mārasti* (you practised), *turidī* (you want); the lengthened pronominal suffix *arāki* (I see you) : the colloquial *yā'* instead of the glottal stop (*hamza*) as in *'āyim* for *'Ā'im* (swimming), *naṣāyih* for *naṣā'ih* (advice); and the silent *hā'* instead of the *tā' marbūṭa* as in *wāhidah*.

It was one of the last Arabic plays to be performed in the first two or three seasons of Arab theatre in Egypt. The final production of Sanua and his friends was probably just a few months later in the autumn of 1872. Sanua's enemies, the English, and their palace partisans persuaded the Khedive that Sanua's plays put on then were maligning the Khedive and his government, so Ismā'il ordered the closure of Sanua's theatre<sup>62</sup>. Sanua was an open supporter of the French. Martin, the editor of the Paris journal, *Illustration*, mentions that it was a combination of factors which led to the closure of Sanua's theatre :-

«Mais lorsque celui-ci, démasquant ses batteries, fit de la scène une tribune où il critiquait et raillait les moeurs dépravées de la cour Khédiviale; lorsqu'il fit représenter une tragédie de sa composition, intitulée *Patrie et Liberté!* lorsque les cheikhs de l'Université de l'Azhar, marchant

62 Chelley, *op. cit.*



sur les traces de Sanua, composèrent et jouèrent des pièces arabes, le vice-roi décréta la suppression du nouveau théâtre»<sup>63</sup>.

Sanua's play *Patrie et Liberté* (*al-Waṭan wa'l-Ḥurriya*) may have been one of the three plays performed that final evening at the Comédie theatre; nothing is known of this work, nor is there any evidence to suggest that the Egyptian scholar Abul-Naga is correct when he claims that 'Abd al-Fattāḥ wrote this play<sup>64</sup>. Why the Khedive should have been disturbed that Azhar shaykhs, like 'Abd al-Fattāḥ, were becoming involved in the theatre remains a mystery. Perhaps he felt that such activity was too worldly and likely to corrupt these men of religion, or more dangerously might have embroiled them in the political arena amongst his critics. There is nothing in the play *Laylā* that might have caused offence to the ruler. There is no trace of any other play from this period by an Azharī despite the statement by Martin repeated elsewhere that Sanua had «initié a l'art dramatique plusieurs étudiants indigènes et même des Cheikhs de l'Azhar qui ont écrit plusieurs pièces recommandables»<sup>65</sup>. With the end of Sanua's theatre, 'Abd al-Fattāḥ lost the opportunity to follow up his first success; no Arabic play was to be performed in Egypt for another four years till the arrival of a Syrian troupe in December 1876.

63 Baignières, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

64 El Said Atia Abul Naga, *Les Sources Françaises du Théâtre Égyptien (1870-1939)*, (Algiers, 1972), p. 77.

65 Sanua, *Aristocratica*, p. VII.