

VOA INTERVIEW WITH NAGUIB MAHFOUZ

The great Egyptian writer, Naguib Mahfouz, is still at the pinnacle of the Egyptian novel, enjoying a coveted status that has never been attained by any other Egyptian novelist. Although he is well above 70, his works still dominate the Egyptian and Arab literary scene. His short stories and novels mirrored the Egyptian society; in them we smell the aura of the old places, the authenticity of its austere, down-to-earth people, and the richness of the characters portrayed in them. Our Cairo correspondent, Hassan Shams El Din, managed to interview this renowned writer for more than an hour.

The setting was a small, cozy corner at the Ali Baba café in Al Tahrir Square, which constantly teems with movement and life, the voices of passers by, and the uproar of traffic. He was sitting in his usual corner, secluded by a somewhat tinted glass that protected him from the glaring lights, observing, engrossed in reveries in search for a new story, new characters for his novels, or reflecting on old memories at the House of Al Qadi, Al Hussain neighborhood, and Abassya.

It was an early spring morning in Cairo. He was sitting with a cup of coffee before him. Also in front of him were the morning newspapers, which he was almost done reading. This is when we started our interview.

In the beginning, could you give us a portrait of the al-Hussein neighborhood in which you grew up?

I was born in December 1911 in House #8 in the Bait Al Qadi Square. The square still exists in its original arrangement, with its basic features persevered to this day; like the Gammaliya Police Station, and the fire department there.

This place was the seat of the magistrate in the old time. I think it was turned into a mosque. All the old original houses; the small houses, with their Arabesque windows, were demolished, and in their places, modern buildings, that were no match for the old houses' beauty and charm, were built.

Mr. Naguib Mahfouz, the neighborhood, or locality where one grows has some characteristics and always leaves certain impressions on him. Which of these would you tell us about?

Apart from my playmates, there are lots of images of common people, especially the bullies, who we used to see in weddings, and watch their fights from the windows. I can also remember common women, women from the lower and upper classes, as well as the bourgeoisie class, as the neighborhood was the a nest to all three classes. Women either walked on foot in their usual clothes, or rode carriages, and automobiles (laughs).

All these things were there before the square became a scene for historical events, with the eruption of the 1919 revolution, as the square was used as an assembly point for massive street protests and deadly fights between the British soldiers and demonstrators from al-Azhar University, high schools and the public.

Did you take part in these demonstrations?

No, I was six or seven years old at the time; my only contribution was watching from a window at the top floor of the house.

The bullies, in particular, were among the characters that appeared in most, or at least, many of your works. Did they have such great effect on you?

That is true; the reason for this was that the square was surrounded by the narrow allies of the al-Hussein neighborhood. Every alley would have its own bully, and there were so many of them, and they used to get into fierce street fights, either in the neighborhood itself or up in the nearby mountain. We used to see them later on being rounded up by the police, or the wounded being transferred by ambulances.

We have seen this type of characters in one of your TV series.

You mean al-Harafish (The Hoodlums)?

Exactly.

Yes.

So perhaps you can recall this image in particular now?

Yes.

And you speak about the street fighting and that every bully had his own area.

Exactly, these characters no longer exist, like the bully, Sheikh Al Hara (the Head of the Alley), and the lunatic. They were all, however, of the long-standing features of that era.

In the beginning of your career, when you read the works of Manfalouti, Taha Hussein, al-Aqad, and other Arab writers, did you fall under the influence of some particular books?

Certainly! When it came to free reading of romances, I was greatly charmed by Manfalouti, and with his work, *Magdalene* in particular. Later on, an era of enlightenment began at the hands of some great professors, like al-Aqad, al-Mazni, Taha Hussein, and Heikal.

I would like to single out Salama Mousa as particularly significant for my generation, as he was one of the biggest advocates of modernity, either with regards to science, industry, or social justice.

Besides Salama Mousa, there are some characters in a person's life that might not be as famous, or well-known, yet leave behind a long-lasting impact on him. It might be even a simple common man who left a great impact on Naguib Mahfouz, right?

Yes.

Do you remember any of such a person?

I can't recall names, but my mind is full of examples.

Like?

Like the character of the bully, which had a great effect on me. Perhaps that was because they were linked to cinema heroes, cowboys.

And?

Also dervishes and lunatics of al-Hussein neighborhood, who flooded the streets. I was also affected by the character of the true Egyptian, either an owner of a coffee shop or a craftsman. They had their own style and jargon.

What was your first published novel?

Abath al-Aqdar (Irony of Fate), which was an historical account of Ancient Egypt. It was published in 1939.

Why did you choose to launch your career with a story inspired by the Pharaonic literature, and not with a story about al-Hussein or al-Ghoriya?

Actually at that time we were, because of the nationalist Egyptian revolution, obsessed with the age of the Pharaohs, particularly after the discovery of the tomb of King Tutankhamun. This discovery inspired me to write a series of stories about the history of Egypt, starting with the history of the Pharaohs. However, I noticed that this was not of the kind that takes you back to ancient history. It rather brings that history to you, which means that there would always be many allusions to the present.

What kind of relation did you maintain with other forms of arts at that time? Were you frequently to the cinema?

We had in al-Hussein one of the oldest cinema houses in Egypt, if not the oldest at all. It was called the Egyptian Club.

The Egyptian Club?

Yes, it was part of the "Egyptian Club" building. I remember the first time I went there I was five years or younger. It used to play serialized western or cowboy movies, and concluded the program with a two-part movie by Charlie Chaplin, or Max Linder, or Zigotwa, which were common comedy themes at that time.

And?

I used to wish that I could sleep inside the cinema house and never leave.

Who do you think is the pioneering figure in Egyptian story writing?

Well, from the historical point of view, there were many fathers for the Egyptian novel. However, there are certain names who are always remembered; such as al-Muwelhi, Heikal, and then the rest of that generation of pioneers who wrote novels on the sidelines of their careers like Taha Hussein, al-Aqad, al-Mazni, and Heikal. This was before the appearance of Tawfiq al-Hakim, who ushered in a new era in story writing, just like he did in theater.

So, you were influenced by Tawfiq al-Hakim's story writing?

Yes, and all his predecessors.

Mr. Naguib Mahfouz, will you tell us about your relationship with other forms of art? We spoke of cinema, right?

Yes.

How was your relationship with music and singing, for example?

As a matter of fact, I agree with al-Aqad who introduced the concept of the collaboration or the overlapping of arts, in that specialization in any given form of art requires a fair knowledge of all its other forms.

For example, al-Aqad wrote about the Egyptian and international plastic arts, as well as about music. Accordingly, as part of our pursuit of culture, I strived to study these other forms of art. I deeply admired ceramic art, and used to regularly attend annual exhibitions that were held in a well-known gallery on Ibrahim Pasha Street.

Unlike the abundance of today, it was an annual gallery for all artists. There, I became acquainted with the pioneers of the art renaissance, who were still young artists, like Nagui, Mahmoud Saeed, Salah Taher.

Later on, and through my readings, I started reading about international art: the art of the Pharaohs, of the Greeks, and of the Middle Ages, besides modern art. I still keep books about abstract and surreal art. As far as music is concerned, I have been familiar with oriental music since my childhood. I listened to music played for belly dancers. I listened to old classical music, Abdul Wahab, Umm Kalthoum, and the later generation. In short, I was familiar with and deeply in love with music.

I also decided to study and develop my taste for international music, and to achieve this I relied on a number of books, as well as on the lessons and discussions presented by Hussein Fawzi in Program Two, and I believe I achieved a good deal of success.

Unlike painting, however, music requires more dedication and in-depth study of harmony and counter band, and so on.

But which moves you more?

Oriental music of course.

Do you see it as more delightful and moving?

Yes, both old and new.

What is your favorite song?

It makes me very happy to watch a program about old music. I like to listen to Abdul Wahab, Umm Kalthoum, Sayyed Darwish, and Abdel Halim Hafiz. Recently, I began listening to more modern singers. They have pleasant voices and their songs are light.

So you not against modern songs.

Modern songs are a hybrid of monologue and the old songs performed by belly dancers. Each stage has its own audience who appreciate its art.

So what do you like about the new songs?

The lightness. They are dancing songs. The proof of this is that Abdul Wahab used to sit down while singing, Umm Kalthoum used to sing while standing, while today a singer would walk up and down the stage or even dance while singing.

And sometimes, they look like they are exercising.

I see the same thing in the program *The World is Singing*, where one might be unable to focus his attention on the song, because the dance, the song, the glamour and the lights are all in one package.

Could you describe your relationship with the cinema?

I think it was in 1947 or 1946, when Salah Abu Seif summoned me. He had read *Abath al-Aqdar* and realized that someone who could write something like it would be able to excel in screenplay.

So this is when you wrote your first screenplay.

When I was there he asked me to write the screenplay. I had no idea what was behind a movie. I had no idea what a screenplay was or how it is written (laughs).

So you didn't have any knowledge of filmmaking?

Not at all, he used to direct me on every step and instructed me on what to do. I began writing and learning from Salah Abu Seif at the same time. He used to tell me to start on something in a certain way, then he would ask me to divide or split the work in a certain manner, and so on and so forth.

So what was the first movie screenplay you wrote?

Zawag Antar Wa Abla (The Marriage of Antar and Abla).

Which wasn't based on your story?

Producers never contemplated adapting movies from Egyptian literature. Adaptations of Tawifq al-Hakim's or Heikal's works were an exception. Originally, however, they relied on western and foreign films for adaptation.

So most of the movies were adapted?

Yes, and it was easier for the producers, who tried it once and when it succeeded they began thinking: if it succeeded once it would succeed again, and success was the most important issue.

Yes.

Adapting from foreign movies also made everyone's work easier. The author of the new story would blatantly make use of the original one, those writing the screenplay would use the existing screenplay, actors would also benefit from the performance of the original actors, and the same applied for the director.

It became a process of drawing life from an existing living model. This is why, when Salah Abu Seif, tried to convince Talahmi to hire me for writing a novel, he failed because Talahmi told him he never allocated any budget for the story. He asked him why he wanted to add a new entry into the budget. When Seif told him that I would write the story, Talahmi answered by saying that there was no reason from me to write the story, since he had all of America making movies for him, and he asked if I was better than them (laughs).

But some of the movies were not adapted, films like 'Al Azima' and 'Zeinab'.

Yes, this is true.

How come?

These were very exceptional cases.

Rare?

Yes, and involved certain directors who enjoyed leverage over the producers. For example, Salah Abu Seif pressed on with *Bashroun*, but told me to forget about writing the story and settle for writing the screenplay. As for the Trilogy, I completed writing it a few months before the revolution.

When did you start writing it?

It took significant time, since I was working as a government employee at the time, and I experienced periods of disruption. I think it took four to five years to write.

The entire Trilogy?

Yes.

Were any characters brought to the screen who closely reflected characters from your novels?

Yes.

Can you mention some?

These characters could be found in *Bedaya we Nehaya* (A Start and An End), as well as the Trilogy. For example when you now mention Ahmad Abdul Jawad, it is (actor Yehia) Shaheen who comes to mind (laughs) since Shaheen has totally taken the place of the original Jawad.

Also when you think of Amina, you cannot help but instantly think of Amal Zayed. Sometimes people become extremely successful in impersonating certain characters.

What did you think of the Trilogy when it left book form and went on screen?

Well, I wrote the former, the latter was co-written by me and Hassan al-Imam, may his soul rest in peace. He was fond of the bright aspects that he was well know for, and this gave the novel its appeal and made the movie a success. It enjoyed great mass appeal.

Was it the first novel you wrote for the cinema?

I never adapted any of my works, they were all done by others.

Others?

Yes.

You haven't written anything?

I haven't written any of the screenplays for any of my novels. Most of my novels were adapted for the cinema by other screenwriters.

Isn't that a bit strange?

Not at all. When someone takes my novel, they can take their liberty in conceptualizing it for the cinema without being obsessed by the novel.

Yes?

But if I was working on my own novel, I think I would not be able to leave out anything, and the outcome would be a botched screenplay (laughs).

So you haven't written a novel for the cinema?

At a certain stage, I was asked to write for the cinema, with or without the screenplay.

And when was that?

I was asked to write *Raya we Skena* (Raya and Skena) , and *Darb Al Mahabeel* (The Lunatics' Alley), it was the brainchild of Tawfik Saleh.

'Darb Al Mahabeel'?

Yes, he asked me to work with the concept and we started to work together.

Yes?

This was a novel written specifically for the screen.

And what was your first novel played on the screen?

Bedaya we Nehaya (A Start and An End), it was the first novel that I sold for the cinema.

So do you feel that the characters of your novel have lost some of their features, or became different from the original characters portrayed in your novels?

Look, before this experiment I have watched movies that were based on novels I read, by Dostoevsky or (incomprehensible). These kinds of movies used to cause me a great psychological shock because in the movie I found a different picture of the hero and heroine than what I had in mind when I read and enjoyed the book. That's why I was under the impression that cinema had a negative impact on literature. But this impression quickly vanished when I started writing movie screenplays. I got to know that when you turn a 300- or 400-page novel into a 90- or 105-minute movie, you will have to make some changes that are forced by the power of art itself. You will have to transform words into images, and other lengthy parts into condensed scenes that take no more than an hour or two. Besides, there are other factors that manipulate the art of cinema - commercial and economic factors. Those who finance the filmmaking would want to make sure their money is not wasted and so they take some details into consideration. All these factors should be taken into account while working on cinema or else it will be a profitless field. All those who get angry are being subjective and not objective. You will find them to be very cultured people of very refined taste who have enjoyed a book and don't want to see it on the screen. At the same time, they don't care whether the movie turns profits or not.

Yes.

So, these kinds of cultured people get angry when they see the cinema version of the book. They consider it nonsense. This is because they want only what pleases them. An objective look at the issue makes the author of the book realize that while he wrote the novel for some thousand cultured readers, when it is adapted into a movie it will be seen by millions of people, 90% of whom are literate. Thus the work of art that was made exclusively for a few thousand people has now touched the hearts of millions, even if conveyed in a different style. It will be good if 60% of them clearly understood the message of the work.

Yes.

I would consider it a victory if only 50% of them understood it.

Has the art of the novel contributed to Egyptian cinema? Has it raised the level of Egyptian films?

Yes, I think so. Why? Because it gives the movie director a space and chances that are not available in the case of writing for cinema. A screenplay writer would write a story in ten or fifteen pages; are you following?

Yes.

Not like a novelist, who writes whole books full of details. This gives the director a chance to choose whatever he likes, and that's why movies that are based on literary works have had good luck.

Mr. Mahfouz, I think we cannot end this interview without talking about the status the Egyptian novel occupies today and about the new generation of Egyptian novelists.

I believe that our literary arena is plagued with many diseases in many aspects, except productivity. I mean, distribution is not as good as it should be and neither is the atmosphere in which novels are written.

Yes.

Criticism at all levels is also not as just and fair as it should be. But production goes on against all odds.

How about quality?

Oh, yeah! The generations that appeared after us have been writing and creating many quality things. They have been experimenting, developing and trying to breathe life into the novel. They go beyond the forms and subjects of what had been written and continue in their own path that is open without an end in sight.

What aspects do you not like about the work of young novelists? I mean do they have any disadvantages in your opinion?

I see a lot of experimenting. All I hope is that it is not experimenting just for the sake of experimenting. So that it becomes only a new fashion. You have to feel an inner impulse to use that form.

What is Naguib Mahfouz's next literary work?

Well, hopefully this summer I will start publishing in al-Ahram newspaper a serial novel titled *Kushtumor*, which is the name of a café in our neighborhood located between Abbassiya and Sakakini.

At the end of this interview, we thank our great novelist Mr. Naguib Mahfouz. We wish him a very long life so that he will continue to entertain us with his novels in which we feel the originality of the kind Egyptian soil.

Thank you.

VOA INTERVIEW WITH SALAH ABDEL SABOUR

A sensitive poet, his words are like a pulse, his poems are full of emotions and are like paintings that can be hung on the wall of Arab literature to form a very rich poetic gallery: the poet Salah Abdel Sabour.

Mr. Abdel Sabour, when did poetry first become your hobby?

I honestly don't remember precisely, just fragments. But I believe that a person is born with poetry. No one remembers when they acquired some of their most innate features, such as hair or eye color. I think poetry is embedded in us. However, I think poetry, in the sense of poetic feeling, as in, how to be able to write poetry, began when I was 14 or 15.

Do you remember what your first published work was about?

I think it was about unrequited love, just like all teenagers.

Yes, but like what?

I remember it started with:

*In this world, you are deception and darkness and hypocrisy
While, in the carriage of art, I worship and pray
What brought together the opposites of night and day;
And a blazing heart with one so hollow?*

That is all I can remember of its first stanza.

Do you think a poet has to be published in mainstream media, such as newspapers, radio or television, in order to feel that he is a poet?

Becoming published is like being born. A book is always there, it's almost immortal, and it's the fruit or fruit basket of the poet, who looks at it and knows that he really has produced something.

When you're writing, do you have to be inspired, or do you rely on your imagination?

First, you must have an eye for the whole world. When I'm dedicated to writing, I prefer to engross myself completely, so much that I often lose a sense of my immediate surroundings. I'm aware, but in a vague and random way.

Can a poet become an employee; I mean, where poetry is his occupation, and receive a salary at the end of the month?

No, because poetry is like a happy occurrence, a sort of magic that may not happen again for a long time. Sometimes, I am unable to write anything, and sometimes, I can write in days what I thought would take a whole year. It's not something that comes on demand.

What's easier to write: poetry in general or descriptive poetry?

I think it's a matter of preference: everyone has a perspective or a vision of some sort. Many find it easy to just look around to write a lot of poetry. This is when a poet believes the purpose of his work is to describe a naturally aesthetic aspect of nature. Eventually, there's no particular mood or disposition for writing poetry.

What about old and modern poetry?

I don't believe in such a thing. There is either poetry or no poetry. I also think that when a person reads poetry, even if it's in a foreign language, he is moved by the music and rhythm of the poem. Knowledge of the language adds the music of feelings and emotions. The form of old and modern is the last thing the audience cares to know. Poetry is essentially what moves and generates a reaction in you.

Do you think the state of poetry reflects the state of nations? And what do you think is the importance of poetry on a national level?

Poetry promotes awareness and understanding, which I think is a good indicator of civility and intellectuality. This will, in turn, reflect on other aspects of material life, and produce a better understanding of the material world, with its machines and physical labor. Poetry is indeed a thermometer of the development of nations.

You need a historical perspective and a survey of the history of this art around the world to attempt to answer the question of the old versus new. What I really believe is that contemporary poetry must reflect the present, it is a known limitation.

Have you ever been disappointed with any of your poems?

More often than not!

Really?

Of course! After I finish writing, I detach myself and take the perspective of a critic. I wait for years to publish some of my works, because I'm not instantly satisfied. I may tear it up, change it, or disregard it altogether.

Could you elaborate using examples?

I shroud my work with a great deal of mystery and secrecy; sometimes it's like working with clay or ceramics, polishing and glazing your work, or keeping it in a crude form for oneself.

But the readers would still find it valuable.

I don't think so, or I would have published it.

Have you ever published something that was unpolished or not up to standard?

No, before I take the decision to publish, I examine the value of my work, whether it is literal, lyrical, descriptive, or musical. These are the basic artistic concerns for producing consistent work that is fit for mainstream media. Sometimes you hear a musician say "this composition has a new melody." So there always has to be something new to offer.

Do you think a poet's imagination can run dry, and there would be nothing more to say?

I have experienced long periods of drought, where I was really convinced that I had dried out. It's not just my imagination; I become strongly aware of a feeling of poverty and need, but then, all of a sudden, the fountain flows again. This happens to many artists.

##

VOA INTERVIEW WITH NOAMAN ASHOUR

He's a famous author. His works are few, but controversial. Yet, he's always smiling. He's written for the high class people, and for the lower class. He's the famous novelist, Noaman Ashour.

Mr. Ashour, where is your literary output?

My output is continuous. Fifteen days ago, I finished my latest play, and I'm about to have it printed. I wrote the play before that one in January. So I regularly write about one play each year. This is sort of abnormal for a playwright who is keen on producing valuable works.

Who do you consider as having joined you in forming a generation of playwrights that have transformed dramatic texts?

Actually, everyone who has recently written for the theater and, of course, those who have contributed to and participated in the creation of the early theatrical Renaissance that accompanied the 1952 Revolution. Among those are professors Lutfi al-Khouli, Saad Eddin Wahba, Youssef Idris, Michael Roman, God rest his soul, and Alfred Farag. Many of these writers contributed to and created the dramatic movement in an unprecedented way that will never be repeated.

Are you a committed writer?

Of course, and my commitment is based on producing one type of drama, which is the realistic type that expresses people's pain and therefore promises a new life and better society.

What do you think of the dramatic movement at present?

Unfortunately, the current dramatic movement is weaker than before. I do not want to say that there is a kind of theatrical shortfall, but the dramatic movement has become too weak to keep up with the current social development.

And why is this?

For several reasons, the most prominent of which is the 1976 Setback that affected many writers and thinkers. But I believe that after the recent reform movement, there has been a new revival. The number of people that attend the theater is growing, but the plays performed so far are not up to standard. They cannot be the basis or foundation for completing the previous theatrical movement that accompanied the 1952 Revolution. There must be an advanced and sophisticated theater, and we must benefit from past experiences and writers, because they are still the foundation up till now.

What is the impact of Egyptian theater on Arab theater, and vice versa?

Actually, there has always been a mutual influence between the Egyptian and Arab theaters. This influence is reflected in the fact that Egyptian theater is more advanced than Arab theater with respect to all Arab countries. Egyptian theater is the oldest, most developed and sophisticated, due to the cultural circumstances that placed Egypt's civilization ahead of other Arab States. A theatrical movement in Egypt is echoed in other Arab countries. It creates a kind of interest in theater in other Arab countries. It urges other Arab States to try to catch up with dramatic or theatrical expression. It is also the other way around; when the dramatic movement in Arab countries is advanced and active, this in turn activates the Egyptian theatrical movement.

Which playwright influenced you the most?

Many playwrights have influenced me, not just one in particular. But I consider Shakespeare to have had the strongest influence on me. He is the king of theater; without Shakespeare, no one would be able to understand, appreciate or write drama. Among the other playwrights are Molière and of course all the classic playwrights. Among the modernists, I believe that I am a student of Tishkov. There's also Shin Okzi, my real teacher, from whom I learned to write tragic comedies. I also appreciate Arthur Miller's work.

What will we be seeing of Mr. Ashour's new works in the current season of the year 1975, apart from what you mentioned at the beginning of the interview?

I'm not sure that it will be out this season. For the time being, I content myself with publishing my plays in books, because the dramatic movement's capacity and theatrical activity do not have the ability to contain the kind of plays I write. The kind of drama I write is far from the prevailing theater based on cheap entertainment.

##

VOA INTERVIEW WITH HUSSEIN FAWZI

Ladies and gentlemen, good evening and welcome to tonight's guest, the great author, Dr. Hussein Fawzi. Welcome Dr. Fawzi.

Thank you.

In an interview with you in a magazine, I stopped at one of your sentences, where you said: "The road to progress must pass through the issue of culture." Of course, we know Dr. Fawzi's interest in the culture issue in particular, but what is it that you mean by culture?

Actually, one cannot limit this issue to a single aspect, but should search for the true meaning of culture. Some people think that culture means obtaining diplomas, and scientific degrees. But that is not what culture is. Others believe that culture is the love for arts, classical music, reading foreign literature and old Arab literature, and so on. This may be so, but culture is more profound. Man lives in a small community, whether in the countryside or the capital. This community is part of a larger one: the nation; and then the largest one: the international community. Man lives in all these communities. In fact, culture begins with Man's awareness of the community in which he lives and its problems, such as family, education, and literacy.

It is the individual's perceptiveness to his community and its surrounding events. I want to say that this is the small thing, on which the person's culture can be based. There are great professors who are very specialized, but when you talk to them about anything that is going on around them, you find that it is outside their realm, because they have isolated themselves. We are familiar with this kind of people; you don't find this kind in Europe or in civilizations as anything but a learned man. There are scholars, scientists and authors everywhere, but they cannot escape the age in which they are living.

This is the nucleus that turns a person living in any community into a cultured person. There's another thing related to culture: it is the relationship among things. Like knowing something about the River Nile, then following it all the way to Aswan or to the Mediterranean Sea, you find that the sea is different from the Nile: then, what is the relationship between the Nile and the sea? How does the Nile run? Where is it coming from? Where is it going? This is a point that affects behavior. One should be aware of the Nile's relationship with irrigation, ethics, the sky, the seasons, and so on. All these questions are Man's awareness that all this information gathered is not separate, but must be integrated.

Strangely enough, in order to understand the issue of culture, we may have to go back in history to two eras or civilizations – for instance, the ancient Greeks. They were excellent people living in the Greek democratic society. They were great philosophers, who searched for the true meaning behind nature. At the same time, they were aware of their society. Socrates was well aware of the performance of his society. He wasn't just a teacher. He talked about everything, because he was aware of everything around him, not only metaphysics or philosophy. We can say that they were excellent men who lived in a great civilization.

There is another fascinating era, in which I personally have been interested for a long time. It is the Renaissance, which came after the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages is actually a very important subject. What is the difference between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance? In the Middle Ages, the Church was the actual ruler, because religion controlled the people's lives, day and night, their social life, family life, and so on. This was the restriction of the time, and it became known as the Dark Ages. There were great thinkers who addressed many issues. But the society was based on the Church. The Catholic Church's authority was shaken for reasons known in history. After that, the reformists' movement appeared. This resulted in the establishment of the Protestant Church in Germany. But the English, Swiss and French Protestant Churches are different from one another. This movement shook the hegemony of the Church.

Mind you, shaking the hegemony of the Church did not mean that the people had become disbelievers. No one wants to understand this. We still have the medieval mentality. There are still people in this country who have a medieval mentality, where just because a person frees himself of certain restrictions, he is declared an infidel. We are Muslims of Muslim parents, and have been brought up in an Islamic way for over 150 years. We've managed to reconcile between our faith, modern science, progress and everything else. However, there are some people, such as the *Gamaat al-Takfeer*, who will come to us and say 'No, you are infidels', or 'No, you are not Muslims. How can you be Muslims?'

What I want to say is that this is a medieval mentality. So do not forget that, when you come to think about some of our societies, you'll find that they are still living in the Middle Ages. Man has freed his mind in order to discover himself, his society and the whole world. This openness created science, geographic discoveries; in literature, it created the establishment of different schools of literature. It created everything to do with cultural life, social life, and political life, which started with the Renaissance.

We hear a lot about 'cultural invasion', and there are many who worry about cultural invasion from one society to another. What is the truth of this matter?

Really, I'm astonished that the generations of an age where I am approaching the end of my life are saying things like that. I want to tell you how our generation was brought up. My mother, who was illiterate; my father, who was educated; my teachers at school, whether Muslim or foreign; they all told us, "Kids, you are from a country that was once at the top of civilization. Today, you are behind all other nations." That was what we would hear. "I was born in the age of leaders. You love your country and want to achieve progress. Your only example is Europe." Our education in public and private schools, whether primary level, secondary, or higher education; all in fact is from the European civilization. When we learn medicine, engineering, mathematics, and so on; we are actually learning from European civilization and culture in terms of its achievements.

We lived at a European level, but not among Europeans; there were communities around us of different nationalities – Greek, Italian, French, English, and German – from different classes. There were the Greek and Italian workers who had Egyptian apprentices also learning from them. It was obvious to us that, in order to progress, we had to learn the secret of this civilization, which includes the whole world today. You

call that cultural invasion? I will give you some examples of cultural invasion in Arab and Islamic history. First of all, when the Muslims conquered other nations at the time, they looked at the civilizations around them that were open to them. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Seek knowledge even as far as China". I think 'knowledge' here means culture. Learning, in this case, is not in terms of science, but knowledge; basically, to expand. They were open to Byzantine civilization. When you see the *Omayyad* (Umayyad) Mosque, you may notice the Byzantine pattern of architecture. There were also the Persians. When they started out as a few tribes at first, they were right next to a great civilization: the Persians. So the Muslims realized that they had to understand who those people were, so the conquests reached Persia, and then even India. During all this, they experienced this so-called cultural invasion. It did not destroy them; on the contrary, the Islamic civilization benefited from it. The Islamic civilization took from the Greek civilization its philosophy and thought; same with the Persian and Indian civilizations. You can call this all cultural invasion, but there's actually no such thing.

Our whole life is a mystery, Egypt's progress is a mystery, and the greatness of the civilization of Modern Egypt amid the Arab World is a really strange mystery. Egypt entered civilization very early and progressed, and continued to borrow it by sending students to Europe, such as Refa'a al-Tahtawi and then Taha Hussein. This means that we were enthusiastic and did not sit and wait for civilization to come to us, but went ourselves and asked it for more and more. That's what I want to say; the term 'cultural invasion' is a crime. For our youth to be brought up thinking there's something called the invasion of civilizations means that they reject civilization. They want to revive a dead civilization. But they can't unless they accept "cultural invasion".

Moreover, there's no such thing as a superior civilization and inferior civilization. The superior civilization is like communicated vessels. It is superior in everything, in all kinds of achievements, material and intellectual. It is like communicated vessels, where the level of fluid keeps rising and rising, whether in the form of an invasion or not; to the extent that even people who have no civilization at all can rise to that level. It goes to or leaks to people from dead civilizations and turns them into a people that progresses with a civilization that is not European or American, but belongs to the homeland where we live and the environment in which we live. And what we've been handed down of our original heritage is combined with what we've picked up from the living civilizations of today. Our civilizations are dead; the Ancient Egyptian civilization is dead, our Roman Greek civilization is dead; what we call 'Arab civilization' has stopped. And I have said this many times before; it stopped in the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries.

One day I told this to Professor Munir, one of our great professors and scholars. He replied: "What you just said is correct. We too say that Islamic *ijtihad* (striving) in has stopped. And what is strange is that when Islamic *ijtihad* stopped, we stopped, too." I said "That's it; that is the sign." He asked, "What is the sign of civilization to you?" I told him that the sign of civilization is when the mind does not stop. I won't even mention big inventions. Take the bicycle for example, I've had mine since 1900, and it hasn't changed. For 20 years, they've been changing the color and shape of bicycles, and this is something I saw 20 years ago. Civilization is the little thing and the big thing, and everything changes. The camera that you use to take photographs

was just made of glass at first, and then you had to wear that black cover over your head. Now, it is made of lenses; what will it be made of tomorrow? What I want to say is that, to me, civilization means that people's minds keep moving, and at all levels. So the term 'cultural invasion' is something that should be thrown out the window and into the garbage. That's what I want to say.

##

VOA INTERVIEW WITH SALAH JAHIN

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to welcome you and our guest tonight, the great artist Salah Jahin. Welcome Mr. Jahin.

Thank you.

Actually, I was perplexed as to how to introduce you given your many artistic works in various areas. I did not know whether to refer to you as a painter, a poet, an actor, a dramatist, or a scriptwriter for television and cinema. In your opinion, which of your works will be most remembered by the people?

I think it is poetry, because it contributes to the movement people will talk about in the future.

Doesn't caricature also record the history of certain political, social and economic periods in Egypt?

I think that caricature is for everyday consumption, but it is archived so that people can look at them or study them.

When you chose to write poetry, you chose to write it in Egyptian slang. Was there a certain motive behind this choice?

Yes, there was a certain motive. One day, I attended the hearing of a lawsuit in the court. The defendants were farmers from Bahout Village. They were charged with rebelling against the feudalist for whom they worked. Scores or even a hundred of them were arrested. In fact, they were treated cruelly. I attended the hearing of those farmers and felt that those were the people I wanted to talk to, not anyone else. So I began to write colloquial poetry.

At the beginning of your artistic career, did the great poet Fouad Haddad have any influence on your choice of colloquial writing?

Of course, Fouad Haddad lit my path. He showed that colloquial poetry can be at the level of international poetry.

You said that you decided to compose colloquial poetry after the Bahoot incident and because of your desire to address the farmers. But, after the great experimentation in this area, we find that colloquial poetry also addresses the educated and the intelligentsia.

Actually, illiteracy is not confined to the inability to read or write, but also includes inability in terms of emotions and culture as a whole. So the kind of poetry we write is affected by the international movement in poetry. I think it also addresses the educated and intelligentsia.

Speaking of colloquial poetry, we should remember Beiram al-Tonsi. Some say that you are the natural extension of this great poet. Do you agree?

It's an honor for me, of course. But I think there are other poets, who are considered more an extension of him than me, such as Fouad Qa'oud.

What does the term 'extension' mean exactly, whether of a poet, painter, novelist or any kind of artist?

It means two contradictory things. The first is the continuation of poetry with the pattern of the first poet. The second is the development of the works of the first poet. In other words, if the first poet had lived and interacted with the new elements in public and literary life, he may have developed his own poetry himself, like the poets who came after him and developed it.

Sometimes, Mr. Jahin, we notice very strange verses and words in your colloquial poetry, or some unusual formations that are difficult to understand.

Poetry is considered a form of art.

Of course.

Poetry is shaped by words. So, when a poet makes shapes by words, he also shapes the words themselves.

Very well.

For example, I wrote a poem in the past, called *Sahbiti al-saghira* (My Little Friend). But while I was reciting it, I caught myself saying *sahbobti* instead. The word '*sahbobti*' has never been used or heard by any one before, but it can be immediately understood, because it includes all the characteristics of a colloquial word.

It is easily understood, but there are some colloquial expressions that reflect a feeling but not a meaning. You once called this type 'the art of nonsense'.

Yes.

What does 'the art of nonsense' mean?

Actually, many useful things fall into the category of 'the art of nonsense', such as nursery rhymes. In world literature, there are also endless works for children, such as 'Alice in Wonderland' and so on. Words in this context have a function – helping the child to play. Sometimes, the artist feels that he wants to revolt against fixed rules. In one of my cartoons, I drew a man walking on the ceiling; his foot up, his head down, his two ears were big, and two men were looking at him. He said to them: 'What's the matter? Haven't you seen somebody with big ears before?' While I was in a symposium, someone asked me: "What does it mean? What's the benefit?" I said to him, it was just the desire to be free of gravity. Rebellion, I mean.

Mr. Salah Jahin, those who follow your artistic output notice two seemingly contradictory aspects in your works: over-depression and over-optimism. This is obvious in your drawings, colloquial poetry, your quartet poems, and even in your movie and television scripts. What do these two aspects stand for?

Actually, there's no life without contradictions. They keep man walking upright on his feet. Gravity pulls him to the right and to the left, and so he remains in an upright posture. I think feeling these two poles maybe make you write, generally speaking. If you're terribly depressed, you won't want to write. And if you're terribly happy, you might want to go and shout for joy by the sea and dance and do anything, and nothing will make you want to write.

I always say art swings between these two polarities. I've also other contradictions I would like to tell you about. Sometimes, I feel my culture is Western and I like only classic symphonies, and so on. At other times, I feel I'm very Egyptian, a Cairene, a very local sort of person from the streets of Sayyida. If I keep only the first feeling, I mean the refined culture and all that, I'll despise the streets and the alleys and the people. And if I had only the other feeling, I'd think that people with Western culture, and classical music and all that, were mad or at least conceited. But lucky for me, these two contradictions are in me, which enables me to blend them, in varying degrees, of course.

Mr. Jahin, there's another thing I'd like to ask. When Sabah el-Kheir magazine started in 1956, the year when you were very active – perhaps you consider it one of the most active periods in your life – are you any different in 1980 and 1981 than you were then, now that you are approaching or have actually turned 50?

Ah, in those days, all I thought of was pleasure, and there was pleasure in everything serious I did. And if I didn't find pleasure in what I was doing, I'd leave it. But now I know that everything in this world has its pleasurable and painful sides.

Has the peak of your artistic output ended, or is it yet to come?

I hope it will come. If it doesn't, then it's past.

What year did it end, and with what works?

Oh, there are lots of works. I mean, I'm always working in different genres. For example, someone may despise musicals, he might say, 'What is there in musicals? What's wrong with the poetry in books?' But creating musicals is fun and their results are great. What I want to say is, if I sometimes write for musicals, and at other times write poems for publication, and sometimes this, and sometimes that – I've been doing it since I first started.

What's your latest work; is it a collection of poems?

Yes, it's a collection of poems called *Angham Septemberiya* (September Melodies). It'll be published soon, God willing.

Your dealing with television is a new experience for you to some extent. Has it added something to you?

First of all, I felt the importance of television as a means of communication. I've become known to a new audience, who had known absolutely nothing about me. They don't even read the papers. That in itself is a gain.

Has your career as a journalist sometimes gotten in the way of your writing more colloquial poetry? Has it stopped you from writing more poems?

Of course not. What actually stops me sometimes from writing more poems is that I exhaust my energy in versifying what you might call things for amusement. But this nevertheless makes me feel I still have a lot of stamina for writing verse.

Finally, Mr. Jahin, what do you hope to do or achieve in the future, God willing?

Actually, in the next few years, I'd like to write plays in prose or verse. I think if I do write for the theater, I'll put songs in my plays, and I won't write musicals or operettas. I'll write plays with songs in them that develop the plot and play a role in the conflict.

Actually, I want in the next few years to write plays, whether in verse or prose. I think if I do so, I'll write plays including lyrics not lyric plays or operettas. These lyrics play a role in the plot.

##

VOA INTERVIEW WITH MOHAMED ABDUL WAHAB

We welcome our guest tonight, the ‘Master of the Generation,’ musician Mohamed Abdul-Wahab.

Mr. Mohamed Abdul Wahab, perhaps the first thing the audience would like to ask you about is the new Egyptian national anthem, whose birth coincided with the signing of the peace accord [with Israel].

What is it exactly you are interested to know? How it was chosen, for instance, or what?

The new national anthem, ‘*Beladi Beladi*’ (‘My Country’), which we have been chanting for more than half a century and which was put into music by the late Sayyed Darwish.

Yes, it is ‘*Beladi Beladi*’, but it was not my choice, and I have no hand in it. It was chosen by President Anwar al-Sadat to be the national anthem. Everybody knows that the tune of the national anthem is usually played at the end of (official) parties, and at the reception of (official) guests or the President.

Are there any specific standards for an international anthem? I mean, the national anthem of any state, does it have specific features?

No. I mean, no one set up certain specifications as standard for national anthems, but it often comes out of major events in the history of the nation, such as wars or revolutions or anything about loving the public, or a certain national event. When the public like a song and play it on social occasions, the government chooses it a national anthem. All national anthems worldwide were the product of such events. Sometimes, the national anthem includes a prayer to God Almighty to preserve the country, save the king or the queen, as in the British national anthem, ‘God Save the King/Queen’; or the German national anthem, ‘Germany, Germany above all’. The rhythm of such types of national anthems is often rapid, not unlike military music. It can be played as music or actually sung on several occasions. Undoubtedly, it was a good choice, because the words of the Egyptian national anthem, ‘*Beladi Beladi*’, are, as well known, the words of the greatest national leader in Egypt, Mustafa Kamel. They were set into music by the late Sayyed Darwish after being adapted by the late Sheikh Younis al-Qadi. The words are gentle and beautiful, not cruel, harsh or bloody. They have an immediate effect on hearts: ‘*Beladi beladi beladi, laki hobbi wa fouadi*’ (My country, my country, for you my love and heart). This is very passionate. You feel that every one holds similar feelings to his country. It was based on a speech by late national leader Mustafa Kamel. This song also appeared during the 1919 Revolution, which is considered the mother of all subsequent revolutions. It was put into music by Sayyed Darwish, who was the pioneer of the modern music that we’ve been playing up till now. At any rate, this anthem deserves to be a milestone in the history of our country, and this is, I believe, what President Sadat had in mind.

This means that there were two or three aspects that made this anthem survive so long in our consciousness: the words as linked to Mustafa Kamel, their simple nature, and the circumstances that gave birth to this anthem, the 1919 Revolution, the mother of all subsequent revolutions as you put it. Also the melody is an important aspect as it is so simple that it needs no special abilities to be performed.

Yes, this is true. There are three aspects, the most important of which is the fact that the melody is so simple and deep at the same time. Being 'simple' doesn't mean light or insipid. Its artistic and musical pillars are all sound and deep. Sheikh Sayyed Darwish used few instruments. The level of tone can be performed by anybody. All these factors made it possible to make it a national anthem. It actually imposed itself as a national anthem rather than being imposed by a decree. I mean anthems have never been issued by ministerial or governmental decrees that the public must take this or that as a national anthem. Rather, the people considered it their national anthem. The evidence is that it survived until now.

This makes us ask you whether it was possible to develop our Arabic music and introduce harmonies and compositions into our songs and music.

Actually this is a long story and needs a lecture. However, I can say simply that in our music there is something called the quarter tone; which does not exist in the western music. The harmony and its wide aspects existed in the western music because of the absence of the quarter tone. If we adopt the western music – and we should do this, as we can't dispense with it in making harmony and developing music in the way every composer wants to do – we should know that not all the types of harmony fit our eastern spirit.

In other words, some may use the (western) science of harmonic music, which includes many branches, to produce something fitting his own artistic work and spirit. Some of these types or branches may not fit our spirit. I think that the use of science requires a sense of taste. I mean, someone may learn one thing, but he cannot make his own spirit that fits his artistic work. Some others may not be able to do this, but they can benefit from the former: what is the difference between them? The difference is that the use of science in itself is a matter of taste and ethics, too. I mean, people learn Arabic language, but this doesn't mean that all of them will be literati. Everyone will have a different sense and color. This is a proof that every one of them has his own taste. This also applies to the science of harmony. We should benefit from the western music, especially as the Arabic music and the western music have many identical tones. In other words, we cannot do without the western music. The issue is not that we have the quarter tone that they haven't. For example, the notes of the national anthem '*Beladi Beladi*' are used in the West, because they don't include quarter tones, but the westerners use it with harmony, the way we did with the anthem.

Do you not see that when a (classical Arabic) poem is sung it enriches the song? I mean when it comes to the music and the rhythm of the poem, especially as we recently heard in period songs of low-level meanings and content.

You have to differentiate. I mean, what do you mean? The way a song is sung or the words? I'm a staunch supporter of classical Arabic poems turned into songs, because their words survive and can be understood in any Arab country, which is not the case with colloquial Arabic, which changes every 20 or 30 years. Nowadays we don't speak the same way, or use the same words or dialects that existed 50 years ago. The classical Arabic words are something different. But if you mean the style used to sing poems in the past, this would remain a heritage, but its melodies can be recomposed in a different way, why not?

I mean a poem like Mr. Kamel el-Shinnawi's '*La Takzibi*' (Don't Lie), which was sung by Abdel-Halim Hafez, Nagat and you.

Yes, but you can't call it a poem in the same sense you meant in your question because your question was about the traditional poem.

I mean classical verse.

Nothing can be called old or new with regard to classical verse. Being old or new is something that is attributed to the composer and the type of composition he makes. I mean, for example, I composed '*Al-Gondol*' (The Gondola), is it a poem like '*Ah Ya Na eish Lel'awazil Andina*' or '*Afdeehi in Hafizah al-Hawa aw Daia'ah*' (I Sacrifice My Life for Him Whether He Kept His Promise of Love or Not)? Also, '*Al-Karnak*', '*Cleopatra*', '*La Takzibi*', '*Ayadhno*' (Does He Think), and '*Al-Khataya*' (Sins) are all poems written according to the classical Arabic verse. But the question is how were they composed? Is the melody of this like the melody of, for instance, '*Ya Garatel Wadi*' (O' Neighbor of the Valley)? Of course not, because the melody of '*Ya Garatel Wadi*' is traditional. I mean, poems used to be composed in this way, but every composer used to show his feelings and style. This is completely different. Since I have started, I was admired for this kind of poems. Verse songs like '*Al-Gondol*', '*Al-Karnak*', '*Cleopatra*', '*Ayadhno*', '*Ergaa Elai*' (Come Back to Me), '*La Takzibi*', '*Al-Khataya*' and '*Lasto Adri*' (I Don't Know) are all poems, in addition to the poems that were sung by late Umm Kalthoum, may her soul rest in peace, like '*Hazihi Lailati*' (This Is My Night), and '*Aghadan Alqaaq*' (Shall I Meet You Tomorrow?) are classical poems, but they're different in terms of composition, which is different from the traditional composition of verse.

I mean that this type of poems enriches our songs with sublime, deep meanings, which we miss in our songs nowadays.

No, this will not come to an end.

This is because it has become rare?

Maybe good lyrics are no longer available, or that artists no longer care. Or perhaps poets are no longer interested in writing poems to be sung; those like Kamel el-Shinawi, may his soul rest in peace, Ali Mahmoud Taha, Dr. Nagi, and Mr. Salah Abdel Sabour, who, may God extend his life, is able to produce extremely beautiful things, but decided at one stage to become involved in politics and then travel abroad

But he has come back

Yes, this is true, and I hope this return would bring us back the kind of poetry that could be performed in the way you just mentioned.

Mr. Abdul Wahab, what if we wanted to present the listener with three stages of poems that have been turned into songs, or three compositional steps? For example, in your performance of the "Ya Garat El Wady" poem, we had a middle step, and modernly composed lyrics. Which do we take?

'Ya Garat El Wady' is very conventional. We can take 'The Gondola' as a clear middle step, 'La Takzebi', and 'Ayazon' are more of an expressionist stage. All of them are different steps, three distinctively different steps.

Mr. Abdul Wahab, I do not wish to conclude this interview without touching on an important issue; the issue of the musical theater. Recently in Egypt, the musical theater has been surfacing for a few days then disappearing for months, and so on. Comparing this to the days of Sheikh Salama Higazi, Sayyed Darwish, Raihani, and Ali Al Kasar, when musical theater was extremely popular, nowadays, despite the many music institutes, evolvement of music bands, and the introduction of many new musical instruments to Arabic music bands, musical theater is lacking in brightness, and has actually diminished.

I agree. This is the natural outcome of the absence of the State's involvement sponsoring and financing the musical theater. Musical theater is extremely expensive, which rules it out for any one seeking to make profits. And naturally, no one would be willing to become involved with musical theater just to be looked at as a hero infatuated by the theater and eventually incur losses.

A musical theater needs a big musical band, vocalists of high popular appeal and star qualities, a huge chorus, a choreographer, and a theater, a big well-equipped theater.

All these things require significant funding, which cannot be provided by an individual or a commercial company, but must be provided by the State, with the purpose and the direction of promoting art and assisting in bringing it to the mainstream.

Without such assistance from the State, musical theater will never be a reality.

You mentioned Nageeb Al Raihani, and the names of others in the old days. But Nageeb Al Raihani, and his contemporaries never had a musical theater in the right sense of the word.

You called it performance theater. There is a big difference between performance theater and musical theater. Performance theater gave the audience something glamorous, like girls in flashy costumes, ten or fifteen attractive girls along with men dressed in waiter-like costumes.

There was strong demand by the audience for these things, especially after times of war.

Musical theater, the ideal form of musical theater, however, was a financial failure, even when it was introduced in times where there were no theaters. Even Sayyed Darwish attempted to set up a musical theater and it went bankrupt.

What about Salama Hegazi?

Salama Hegazi was an individual, not a musical theater; he was a vocalist who performed beautiful songs, in the sense that there was no dialogue, not chorus. There was no musical dialogue going on between him and another female vocalist for example.

He was simply a vocalist who had a good voice, and instead of singing with a band, he sang on stage, songs like "An Kont fel Gaish", "Adao", "Saheb Al Alam", "Fainani Fe Gharami Sahw", "Mish Aref" "Juliet Ma Haza Al Skoon", all these were songs from Arabic lyrics that he performed with a great voice, people liked him as a good singer, but not as musical theater. The audience sought him for his good voice, but this is different than the musical theater.

So are financial considerations the only requirements missing for the revival of the musical theater or are there other missing artistic aspects?

Funding is what brings art together, funding is required to create a theater, to find vocalists, funding is needed to screen the massive pool of musical talent to compose a music band of 40 or 50 highly-talented musicians, funding is also needed to build a good chorus, and to find a composer who can dedicate a year or two to compose an entire novel into a musical. This is different from hiring a composer for a weekend or a week. All these elements must be available.

Do you mean that, After the passing away of such great singers as Abdel Halim Hafez, Umm Kalthoum and Farid al-Atrash, have you not been attracted to any voice that you expect would potentially reach anywhere near their high status?

Well, I cannot give any opinion about this point. We should leave it to the audience to judge. This is not our business; we are not judges. I mean, suppose I tell you that someone is very good and the audience didn't see him as good, will they like him just

because Mohamed Abdul Wahab praised him? Of course not! So we have to leave it to the audience.

There is another important thing; music compositions, I mean instrumental pieces. You used to produce, from time to time, your own pieces that the audience found particularly interesting. People used to feel, interact with and respond to these pieces. There were other music bands at the time producing their own instrumentals like Ali Farag, Attiya Shararah and Abdel Halim Ali. But now such works have almost disappeared from our music arena. What do you think?

I think instrumentals have not disappeared. Only the way of presenting them to the audience has changed.

How?

Unlike the songs of the past, any song now has an introductory piece that you can take out and play independently. Take the songs of Umm Kalthoum for example. They all include introductory instrumentals. Are these not played? These are even longer pieces than what we used to record in the past. A record in the past was between three and a half or four minutes long, while now an introduction could be five or even six minutes. Besides, you can edit the introduction of the first and second verses and play them alone. Most of the pieces broadcasted now on radio are taken out from songs. You see? It is there. Only the form has changed.

Where is the music like that of ‘*Ilayha*’ (To Her); and where are the wonderful pieces of yours which we used to listen to? Anywhere in the world there are songs and there are music compositions. We, too, wish to see our own compositions and wish them to be looked at as important as songs.

Of course this is necessary, but you cannot blame us for the current situation. The radio is to be blamed for it. The radio should direct more attention to music, and Mrs. Safiya has promised to take this into consideration. It may be out of her hands as it is the problem of the government's routine itself; which gives a composer LE 150 or LE 200 for a song but gives a musician LE 7 or LE 10 for an instrumental piece. Why should he care for instrumentals then? He would go for a song that will return LE 100 or LE 150. It is very painful to see them look at music composition this way. I personally think that singing is an integrated part of music, though. I mean that music is the origin; music is the art and singing is a branch of this art. Like solo and chorus singing are considered two branches of the same art. And they are all branches of music. Still, we don't give music its due attention. We in the Arab world still attach greater importance to the human voice. The human voice remains everything to us. Of course we noticed recently that music started to become something important that gives a song its value, and the audience started to see music as a very important aspect of a song.

There is more than one band playing music, folklore and old songs nowadays; what do you think of what these bands present and what else do you think they can do?

Like the Umm Kalthoum Band, the Arabic Music Band, and, most recently, the National Music Band.

I haven't listened to the works of the National Music Band, but I listened to the works of the other two bands. They are good. They present the Arabic culture as it is but in a very refined and decent way. Their performances are balanced and well organized. They adhere to the beginnings and the ends, which is great to see in beautiful old Arabic pieces.

Mr. Abdul Wahab, can you say that you finally see the future of the Egyptian song with an optimistic eye? Or are you pessimistic about it?

I am optimistic about it as long as the new generations are well educated. I don't have a complete idea about what they have learned so can not judge whether those who have graduated from the institutes are, from my own point of view, accomplished or have a mature feeling of their Egyptian culture. However, I always go for learning. As long as there is education and there are institutes, there will be progress and development.

##

VOA INTERVIEW WITH RIAD EL SONBATI

His imprint on Eastern music is quite evident; many musicians have learned in his school of art. He is a pioneer musician all over the Arab World and he has composed music for almost all singers. Singers sought his music because a voice is born only when it sings the music of Riad El Sonbati.

Mr. Riad, we are so pleased to meet you. We know that you do not like radio interviews and this makes me ask: what is the reason for that?

I find a kind of spiritual delight in my solitude. Being alone helps create an atmosphere of creativity that facilitates music composition. Isolation from society feeds my soul more than merging with it and this is actually my nature.

Generally speaking, a real artist is the one who works more and talks less. Mr. Riad, the new generation does not know the story of your meeting with the Diva of the Arabic song, Umm Kalthoum; would you unravel the secret of how you met?

In short, we met while we were ascending the first steps of the ladder of success. We met in the countryside and villages surrounding Mansoura. At the time, I was singing at wedding parties, while she started with *al-Mawlid al-Nabawi* where she sang the story of the Prophet's birthday.

When was that?

Almost 50 years ago. We were still beginners and we met at the Delta railway stations. One day I saw her at dawn, she was returning from a party. We met at the Badarin station at dawn. I was with my father, wearing the traditional Egyptian fez when I met her. The second meeting was when I came to Cairo and started my career as a composer.

What was the first song you composed for Umm Kalthoum?

I composed the music and lyrics for the song *al-Nom Daeb Ayoun Habibi* (Sleep Plays with My Lover's Eyes).

Mr. Riad, certainly you are one of the few, if not the only one, who has kept the Eastern flavor in music; what is your point of view?

Eastern music is the best in my view. Until now, I have not found another type of music that is as beautiful as Eastern music. So we should preserve this type of music and protect it.

This means that you believe that Western musical instruments can be hazardous to Eastern music?

Of course, Western instruments complement the oriental Arab arrangement. There is no problem to introduce some Western instruments like the contrabass, the accordion and the organ, but we have to give them an authentic Arab and Egyptian character.

Then, regarding Western instruments, we can use them; what about giving a Western flavor to musical composition?

No, I do not approve of that at all, because Western music has its own special rules that we cannot follow. Egyptian music is different in part and as a whole than Western music.

Do you believe that some composers turned to Western music in order to highlight the Eastern character and better deliver their feelings?

Of course, they introduced Western music in an Arab style.

Mr. Riad, this is not a compliment but you have a very beautiful voice, why don't you sing professionally?

I do not sing because I like to focus on doing one thing. I did not want to keep myself from serving my mission in life: composing music.

We enjoyed your music sung by the Diva of the Arabic song, Umm Kulthum, and many other prominent singers; do you prefer composing poems or regular songs?

Each type has its own beauty, but I am more inclined toward poetry, because I truly love it.

Which is easier to compose?

Colloquial songs are easier to compose, whereas it is difficult to compose music for poetry. One has to taste the lyrics and feel them, such as the poem *Rim Ala al-Qaa' Bayn al-Ban Wal-Elm*. When I first read this poem with Umm Kalthoum, we definitely needed Rami in order to understand all these meanings, and he explained them to us. Thus, before composing, one should understand the lyrics and their meanings.

Does this mean that you may refuse to compose a song because you do not feel its meanings?

Of course, if I am not attracted to it, I won't compose music for it.

How do you evaluate the Arabic song at present time?

Only meaningless lyrics. The lyrics I want are those that touch my heart and feelings.

Does this apply to all sorts of Arabic songs?

Of course.

What is the reason behind that?

The reason is obvious; the audience wants to listen to beautiful lyrics. People sing lyrics because music makes words come to life in the hearts of people.

So is there a shortage in poets or in meanings?

There is no shortage in poets; we have an abundance of poets whose poetry is eternal and whose output is fertile and beautiful. I recommend that all composers compose music for poetry in order to create a new trend in Arabic singing that is refined, cultured and purposeful. People need to listen to refined music and not to cheap lyrics that do not live. Refined lyrics are fixed and eternal. I would be happy if composers composed music for poems. That would be wonderful.

This age requires fast and short songs, doesn't it? Will the poem persist at the present time?

Short songs do not live long, like a hungry person who eats a sandwich, which is different from eating a good, fatty and nutritious meal. A long song may not be good because of its poor meanings and weak composition. On the contrary, you may listen to a long song for an hour with fascinating lyrics, a beautiful voice and a good composition. I assure you that the time will pass and you won't feel the length of the song, as if it were only five minutes long.

As for voices, do you believe that we still have beautiful voices like we did in the past?

Both male and female voices nowadays are limited. They have limited potentials. For example, if the electric current was cut off or the microphone broke down while one of the female singers was singing (although I appreciate them all), will her modest voice be able to perform the way it did through the microphone? Of course not, if the microphone is turned off, she would only be moving her lips, because she actually has no voice at all.

Does this apply to all singers without any exceptions?

Yes, all of them. All the voices on stage nowadays are not bad; on the contrary, they are beautiful voices. What I am talking about is called voice capacity. If the microphone was turned off there won't be a voice. A good singer sings beautifully even in whispers. A sensitive singer gifted with a strong voice is not affected if the power is cut off. Umm Kalthoum, for example, was singing before 4000 people in one of her concerts on an open stage theater when for some reason the microphone broke down. She performed without the microphone and there was no difference at all as if nothing had happened. That is a capable voice that lasts forever. Current singers do not have such capacity.

Let's move on to composers. Among today's composers, who do you find is taking rapid strides forward?

Some composers are moving ahead quickly because their production is light. One has to be cautious when taking rapid strides or one will fall. Without mentioning names, I advise them to carefully bide their time. Many composers are hasty nowadays. They must be careful and deliberate in producing songs that last forever, rather than achieving instant success that soon fades.

Mr. Riad, what are you currently composing?

There are two songs for Umm Kalthoum, and she will start working on them soon, God willing. We meet almost daily to work on a light song called *Shoufo Eddonia* (Look at the World). We are also composing a poem by late Dr. Ibrahim Naji, who wrote *al-Atlaal* (The Ruins), entitled *Entizar* (Waiting).

##

VOA INTERVIEW WITH MOHAMED EL MOGI

An agricultural engineer, who gave up the cultivation of gardens for the cultivation of melodies, he filled the musical arena with the most magnificent and sweetest songs sung by the likes of Umm Kalthoum, Abdel Halim Hafez, Shadia, Sabah, Zubeidah Tharwat and Ali al-Haggar. He is responsible for hundreds of songs, many of which are still enjoyed by the dilettantes of what is known as the 'original music'.

His name is Mohamed El Mogi, the renowned musician and composer. Our Cairo correspondent, Hassan Shams El Din, sat down with this living legend and charted his creative and artistic journey through the years.

You went from an agricultural engineer, cultivating gardens and greenery, to producing compositions, melodies and beautiful sounds.

Beautiful sounds begin like flowers and budding plants. There is no doubt that my background and my study of agriculture, on which I spent quite some time, have had an impact on me. Being surrounded by so much greenery, beautiful weather, beautiful meadows and the fragrance of flowers served as a catalyst for my artistic side to emerge. It's a magnificent feeling felt by anyone who has smelled the scent of grass; it purifies one's feelings, psyche and spirit.

So what place are you describing?

Kafr el-Sheikh. I learned how to farm in Shebin el-Kom, became an employee at the Public Land Ownership Authority, and then an agricultural supervisor at Etay al-Baroud, before the King's abdication. Since then, the sound of art resonated in my ears and mind. I had a lute, which I always kept at hand. I had it during my childhood, and still have it now. I used it to play songs by Umm Kalthoum, Kahlawi, and Farid al-Atrash. I used to try to play anything I heard on the radio; it was my only leisure time, and it was how I developed my singing and musical composition.

What is the source of your passion for music and art, which passed from your fingertips to the lute?

My father really loved this instrument; we also worked together in the same State-owned institution. The lute was his constant companion at home as a pastime. He and my uncle used to buy the latest Abdul Wahab records as soon as they were available in Mansoura. They would listen to them, and play them long into the night. These were our means of leisure: listening to those records and playing along on our lute.

After you left Kafr el-Sheikh, or Shebin el-Kom, did you study music to develop this hobby?

No, I wasn't able to because of my job at the time, so I quit. I began to search for any work in the city that would help me continue my artistic career. Since art couldn't provide a source of living, at least at first, it was necessary to depend on a more reliable source of income. In Cairo, I worked as a laboratory assistant in the Abbassia Secondary School for Girls, while still keeping my lute by my side. I attempted to

enroll in the Institute of Music, but realized that the curriculum and studying interfered with my abilities to actually produce music, especially as I was internally charged and there was so much music that needed to be released. The curriculum consisted of courses in literature, Arabic, Qur'an and poetry, which I had already studied in secondary school. What I needed was more tailored studies in basic music, writing musical notes, music theory, and everything related to actually writing and playing music. There was a Professor Hefni at the Institute who recognized that I needed a special form of studying, but insisted that students at the institute had to be committed to completing the entire curriculum. This was when I informed him that I would not be able to continue.

Could you tell us about your first composition, and the first voice that sang it to the public?

There was no particular voice at first. My music was aired on a radio program called "The Music Corner", and the first artists to sing my compositions were Faida Kamel, Fatma Ali and Mohamed Qandil. This was before I had the opportunity to meet Abdel Halim Hafez.

And which song was the first to bring you public exposure?

It was *Safini Marra* (Make Up with Me Once); keep in mind this was during the 1950s. Abdel Halim and I had begun writing it in 1952, but with little success. We played it during a concert in Alexandria, but it didn't appeal to the audience, since its tone and melody were unpopular at the time. However, two or three years later, we returned to the same stage that witnessed our failure. This time, our colleague, Kamal Al Tawil composed a song called *Ala Ad el-Shouq* (As Much as the Passion), which was the starting point of our artistic launch; for me, Kamal, and Abdel Halim.

There is no doubt that *Safini Marra* was a real door-opener for us, as well as *Ala Ad el-Shouq*. I used to call these two songs the horses that pulled the cart carrying Abdel Halim Hafez and these two compositions. Abdel Halim was becoming more and more popular. Movie roles soon followed, and we began a foray into writing music for the cinema. It began with the songs *Lahn al-Wafaa* (The Fidelity Composition) and *Ayamana al-Helwa* (Our Good Days). There is a verse in *Ayamana al-Helwa* that became particularly popular and, along with it, Hafez's presence on the screen. As a result, our compositions began to change from what we had originally made for the radio.

Mr. Mogi, you are renowned for being a creative musician and composer who excelled in writing poetry in challenging and difficult styles: what would you say was the reason behind this?

I think my love for poetry and Arabic is why. I used to get the highest grades in Arabic, calligraphy, and poetry recitation classes during my years as a student.

Do you try to learn poetry by heart?

Of course I cannot memorize every single line that I read but, when I compose, I'm fully dedicated to the lyrics. I read very carefully, and try to 'live' the words and the

poem. I try to identify with the characters, dive into the depths of the meaning intended by the poet. I think this is the best way to compose; that is, to identify with the meaning intended by the poet and to write music to suit it. I believe that one should be able to arrive at the meaning carried by the verse, the lyrics, the power and tempo of the poetic enunciations. Passion for poetry itself is extremely important. Love of poetry, its good composition and performance reflect the level of the artistic culture possessed by the artist.

You said that when composing, a composer must dive into the depths of the poem and identify with all its meanings and imagery; can you elaborate more on that?

The captivating imagery in poetry is a message not apparent on the surface. If a poet like Nezar Qabbani gives us an image of him “being drowned by love”, and in my composition I write: 'I am drowning...drowning', then it means that I've identified with the meaning constructed by the poet.

What is the reason for the almost complete absence of poetry in music today?

I believe it's a lack of interest; either on the part of the composer or the singer. They may be intimidated by poetry and its recitation. I don't mean to offend anyone, but the majority of singers and composers nowadays are in a hurry to release songs and albums. Writing poetry requires time, dedication, and reflection on, and engrossment in, the meaning of the poem. This is a lengthy process that could last many nights. Today's generation of musicians want to compose as fast as possible in order to make more money. In my day, we paid little attention to how much a song would pay us or who was going to pay us! We were passionate about our work and the art itself, and about performing and art.

Can you recount for us your first meeting with the musical legend, Umm Kalthoum?

She was the type of artist who understood and appreciated the need for continual musical innovation, and was working on an anthem commemorating the evacuation of the British forces from Egypt. It was based on a poem by Ahmed Ramy entitled *Alyawm Qad Tam al-Galaa* (Today Liberation Is Complete). She contacted me because I was becoming more and more popular as a composer. When I arrived, I found her sitting with Ahmed Ramy, Abdo Salah and Ahmad Hefnawy. Ahmad Ramy recited the poem for us, and afterward said to me “May God help you to compose music fit enough for this poem.”

That was my start with Umm Kalthoum, and it was a challenging one, because here I went from a high school student, glued to the radio listening to the vocal talents of Umm Kalthoum, to actually being in the same room with her, composing for her, listening to her. It was very intimidating, and I was very nervous. When she asked why I was so nervous, I replied by saying that standing before her was like standing in awe before the Great Pyramid, and that I was an ardent disciple of her artistic school.

She cut me off, saying that I composed for others like Sherifa Fadel, and Mahi al-Attar, which I acknowledged. She then asked me to think of her as a voice, just like

any other voice I worked with. She asked me to close my eyes and picture myself composing for Sherifa Fadel, saying this would help me finish the composition.

Thus, she managed to dissolve my fear and calm me down. With her words still ringing in my ears, I began working. Later, I presented her with my work and it was well appreciated, thank God.

How many songs did you compose for Umm Kalthoum?

Not many; I scarcely wrote for her. This was because I always believed that she was not meant to sing songs written by me, but should sing exclusively for El Sonbati or Zakaria or al-Kassabgi. That's why I was always cautious when composing for her, and never wanted my work with her to continue. I even avoided her most of the time.

What was the last composition you wrote for Umm Kalthoum?

Es'al Rohak (Ask Yourself), in 1971 or 1972.

##

VOA INTERVIEW WITH YOUSSEF WAHBY

He is the people's artist, the pioneer of Arab theater and the Father of Arab Cinema. He's the prominent artist, Youssef Wahby. Egypt honored him on more than one occasion, and his audience has always honored him because he has given so much. Mr. Youssef Wahby was the son of an aristocratic family. He defied his family in his love for art, choosing it as a profession and sacrificing everything to become an artist. But what did he get in return?

Art gave me the love of the people, the love of my country and the love of my audience. Moreover, I was recognized by supreme government bodies in Egypt to have fulfilled my duties to the country in which I was born. I believe that this is a great reward, even more than I deserve.

You have many memories with the Ramses Theater group, which you founded and sponsored. But what were the Ramses Theater's contributions to Arab theater?

The most significant contribution began when I returned to Egypt and was shocked to find that Egyptian drama had waned into a new genre: musicals performed by Naguib al-Rihani, who played a character called 'Kish Kish Bey'. These musicals, or rather this Franco-Arab genre performed by Naguib al-Rihani, were very popular among audiences. I found that theater had almost disappeared and that all the contributions of the pioneers were being lost.

I'll never forget when I saw an important person walking in dirty clothes on Imad Eddin Street. As I looked closer at his face, I realized that it was Mr. Aziz Eid, God bless his soul. When I asked him what had happened, he told me to please tell his audience that he wanted to buy a wooden box and some shoe polish, so that he could become a shoe-shiner, because good art did not do him any good to the point that he had reached such a state of suffering, pain and deprivation.

I had inherited some money from my father, and I was determined to stay abroad after I graduated from the Higher Institute for Performing Arts in Milan. But this incident really touched me, and I seriously thought that I had to save the theater from its deteriorating state as much as I could. I held meetings with Naguib Eid and I took him abroad. In the cafes of Paris, we decided to form the Ramses Theater Group made up of drama artists who were suffering from the same state and need. We returned to Egypt and formed the group. I wanted the group to gather all those who had really served serious theater, such as Hussein Riad, Mansi Fahmi, Aziz Eid, the late Rose al-Youssef, Zainab Sidqi and many other prominent artists. We began rehearsals and opened the Ramses Theater on March 10, 1923.

I had difficulty in finding a theater, but fortunately, I found Radio Cinema, which became the Ramses Theater, and is now the Al-Rihani Theater. I built the theater in Radio Cinema and we began working. Fortunately, we were all sincere, and I wanted to avoid the mistakes of others that led to their fall. They had never tried to avoid these mistakes. We had to be punctual and start on time as mentioned in the advertisements. We had to be careful with directing, lighting, costumes and all the tools that fascinate the viewer because I was taught that theater is a frame of

fascination. Thank God, as everyone knows, the Ramses Theater was a success and we performed about 320 Egyptian and translated plays.

How did Youssef Wahby turn from theater to cinema after the latter appeared in Egypt?

When Mohammad Karim first came to Egypt in 1926, we remembered that when we were children our favorite hobby was the cinema. In fact, during my last years in Italy, I not only focused on theater or working in Italian theaters, but on cinema as well. It was the time of silent movies, which made it possible for actors to play a role in any country. Of course, I started with small roles, and gradually worked my way up to a reasonable level. Sometimes I performed leading roles. Karim told me that we should promote film-making. In fact, we thought of making *Zainab* into a movie. *Zainab* was a book written by the prominent author, Heikal Pasha. As soon as Karim decided to produce this movie, we began. The movie featured Bahiga Hafez and Sirag Munir. This was our first contribution to cinema, and we found it a great opportunity to produce Egyptian movies or Arab movies in Egyptian dialect. We produced the movie, *Awlad Al Zawat* (Aristocratic Children), and it was the first Egyptian movie in Arabic.

What is your opinion on today's cinema compared to the cinema of the past?

There is no doubt that cinema has made significant progress in directing, and especially in photography. The techniques are now at an acceptable standard, thanks to the constant researching and studying by our young directors who have become professionals. But what is clear to all of us is that stories in the past were of more concern to the audience than today. They were social stories. At that time, we were fighting corruption, feudalism and colonialism. This of course moved the audience and their sentiments. People liked cinema because movies were critical of our faults and our social ailments. All the stories today end with the word 'love', to the extent that I keep wondering if this love is ever going to end. For example, there are the movies: *Gharam el-Hob* (The Passion of Love) and *Fe al-Seif Lazim Nihib* (In the Summer We Must Fall in Love), and later we'll probably have movies called: *Hob al-Hob* (Love of Love), *Masayib al-Hob* (The Crises of Love), *Fadayeh al-Hob* (The Scandal of Love) and we are going to get lost in love. It is as if movies should only be about love; there are no social stories, no studies, and no moral or psychological issues, like we see abroad. Movies are now only limited to stories about love, passion, and peace.

Let's go back to theater again: today, we have returned to the musical theater. In the days of the Ramses Theater group, there were musical groups competing with Ramses. Who used to win the competition?

It wasn't really a competition. There was only one musical group, which was that of Naguib Al-Rihani, and the rest were foreign groups visiting Egypt. At the time, we also performed musicals, but it did not actually depend on dancing and singing. It was based on concise plays or social themes, whether comic, dramatic or tragic. Among these musicals were *Khafaya al-Qahirah* (Secrets of Cairo), *Al-Isti'rad al-Azeem* (The Big Show), *Naqir and Naqeer*, *Dihk Wa Domoo'* (Laughter and Tears), and so on.

Hence, at the time, there were no musical groups except for Naguib Al-Rihani's, and the other groups were performing operas.

What about the Al-Kassar group?

The Al-Kassar group did comedy, mixing music with some dancing. They mainly depended on songs and the play itself.

In your point of view, what constitutes a musical? Is it simply inserting songs during the play, like, for example, Sayidaty al-Gameela (My Fair Lady)?

Sayidaty al-Gameela is not a musical, but an opera. A musical deals with several topics, with dances, beautiful scenery, songs, sketches and the rest of the features of musicals. Musicals introduce all the genres that entertain the audience. But *Sayidaty al-Gameela* is not a musical.

*Hold your horses, you and her
Wake up and realize who you're talking to
I am Kamal Bey al-Tarouty, known to millions
I am the teacher of the princes and elitists,
I taught etiquette to the aristocrats
I can make something out of you and make you human
How can some worthless people like you humiliate me,
when I am Kamal Bey al-Tarouty?
Go away old man with your silly games
Welcome you little Bey.
You ignorant and common people! I will show you who I am.
And who are you; the son of a Duke?
Let me pluck his feathers out
You think I'm standing here for nothing?
Neither you nor her, I will.
If you are a Bey, why are you coming to live here?
Live here? I don't want to live here.
Then what are you doing here?
You know girl, you have potential.
Who are you calling a girl?
Your style, your hair and your smile
You can...
Hush and shut up, I am your Lady
The man is flirting with me
You are...
You're making fun of who I am?
People of the ally, come and see. Sleda blow your whistle
Yes Sodfa, we will help
Am I helpless? I am Sodfa!
Soffage!
He's calling us names, father!
People of the neighborhood, come and see.
Do you need our help?
So you think I need help? I can tear a hundred like him apart*

*Don't hold me back and I'll finish him
No, don't get your hands dirty
I will crack his head open, and you do the rest
Oh what a pity
People of the ally, come and see. Sleda blow your whistle
What do you want, you cross-eyed chicken; you spineless, skinny man?
You ill-mannered, uncivilized man!
You miserable despicable monkey-face!
I hope those glasses of yours break.*

I wish you would tell us your opinion in a few words on the theater of the absurd which died before it was born here in Egypt?

It's absurd.

Youssef Wahby, the actor and director, is still entertaining the audience with his art. We wish you health and a long life. But why did Youssef Wahby, the author, stop writing?

I didn't stop. My theater stopped, and the Ramses Theatre depended on my plays. Ramses Theater has now become the National Theater, because all the artists in Ramses Theater moved to the National Theater Group. Now there's a national group, and there's no longer a Ramses Theater group. That's why I stopped writing; especially because most of my writing was related to social criticism, social justice and true socialism. At the time, the country was in need of such topics, but thank God we've achieved the desired improvement and social progress. My plays were suitable for a certain era. But we have performed some new plays. Recently, we made some nationalist plays, which shed light on the 70 years of resisting the British occupation since the first foreign soldier stepped on Egyptian land. We also introduced social plays, but we stopped because we no longer have a theater.

Youssef Wahby the comedian is no less talented than Youssef Wahby the tragedian. Why do you not perform more comedy roles?

I have presented many comedies, but as I answered the previous question, we have no theater to show comedies and dramas, that is why we stopped completely.

Why doesn't the government provide Youssef Wahby with a theater?

The government should answer that question.

What will Youssef Wahby introduce next season?

That of course depends on my health. As you know, I had a relapse last year that forced me to stop all activities. But, God willing, I will participate in any work that satisfies my artistic taste and hobby. Until today, I am an amateur actor. I will not hesitate to accept any role in a play that is offered to me.

Is there anything new in cinema?

No, there's nothing new in cinema; there is in television. There is an agreement with some of the companies operating in the Gulf to provide them with colored series. We have already started preparing them. I, along with my dear friend Fouad al-Mohandis, will participate in these series.

Why do you not work with Fouad al-Mohandis on a play?

Of course, I'd love to, because I love Fouad al-Mohandis. I am very much amused when I watch him, because he's a real artist. But until now, perhaps we haven't found a play that we could perform in together. If there is a role for each of us, I would not hesitate to work with him.

Do you believe that there is a crisis in theatrical composition in Egypt?

Of course there's a crisis. But still, we must admit that there are good Egyptian plays. Unfortunately, most plays, especially comedies, are based on foreign plays. This means that a writer of comedy is rare in Egypt.

How do you explain that a play can stay for a year or more in the theater?

Of course, this is because it is successful, since it depends on its popularity among the audience.

###

VOA INTERVIEW WITH YEHIA SHAHEEN

Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to welcome tonight's guest, the great actor, Mr. Yehia Shaheen. Hello.

Hello.

Mr. Yehia Shaheen, the minute I saw you now, a question flashed across my mind: where have you been?

I'm around, thank God, and I'm working. It's just that I'm usually very picky about my projects.

Can we say then that you're in the process of preparing for a new project?

I'm always in a state of preparation, thank God, and I do one film every year. Right now I'm waiting for my film, *El Shak Ya Habibi* (It's Suspicion, My Love), to come out. And I'm waiting for the public's reaction so that I can pick a new type of movie in which to act. I choose new things all the time. Sometimes I make films abroad.

During this period, I did three movies. One was Moroccan, I was the only Egyptian in it and the rest of the cast was Moroccan. The other two were Algerian and Libyan. In other words, I took part in three joint productions. By the grace of God, what matters to me is a good film. And if it is good, I don't hesitate to take part in it.

From your work in joint productions in the Arab West, were you able to become familiar with some of the aspects of cinema there?

Actually, the Arab West is considered to be in its first stage, I mean, it does not produce the same amount of films we do. After all, we're way ahead of them. But they're beginning from the point we started. What appeals to me is the subjects they choose. For instance, I did a movie there about land, like the movie, *Al-Ard* (The Land) that we did [in Egypt], but this time it's about Moroccan land. It was wonderful for me to do something about Morocco, playing a purely Moroccan character. It's hard for me to speak Moroccan Arabic, of course, but we did a voiceover that was positively beautiful. I mean, you'll find me speaking with a Moroccan accent exactly like the Moroccans. This was something new for me.

As for the Algerian movie, it was a joint production between Egypt and Algeria, with me and Nadia Lutfi from Egypt and two young stars from Algeria, a boy and a girl. It was about the 1948 War and the defective weapons. In the Libyan film which I did three years ago, there was me, Farid Shawki and Layla Tahir from Egypt, and the rest of the cast was from Lebanon, Libya, Morocco and Tunis. It had its beautiful side, because interaction and the change of location, subject and atmosphere allows the actor to offer something genuinely new.

And speaking of joint productions, I did a film with the Italians called *Il-Figlio di Cleopatra*, Cleopatra's Son, and we had with us a well-known American star, Matt Damon. And there was also Sheila Gabir and Arnaldo Foà from Italy, who's a big actor there. When we worked with them, they gave us high points. When we headed to Rome to complete some shooting over there, the greeting they gave us was spectacular.

Why?

Because they valued us as Egyptian artists. Not just me, but Shukri Sarhan, Layla Fawzi and Hassan Yusuf. I mean, we were a group that represented Egypt. We really felt proud to be Egyptians amid these foreign giants. Joint productions don't necessarily give you immediate benefits, like money for example. So we have to forget about that for a while. Not every production is just for commercial and material gains, but we get to know each other's names and capabilities, and become familiar with civilizations and art. That's the real gain.

Of course.

I mean you don't only get material gains from the box office. No, we don't work for box office success. We work for the reputation of our country, about what's in our country and its potential.

That's the case when you work in joint productions abroad?

Yes.

It's a great thing for us to hear that you're involved in joint productions here or abroad, and that you speak with complete enthusiasm about works of art. This brings me to another question: the continuity of an actor's output may be long or short, so what are the factors that could play a part in either case?

It all goes back to love. Then, comes hobby, and the third factor is self-denial. The fourth is artistic collaboration. An actor's belief in what he's doing is extremely important. Change is very important because every era has its own beauty. I mean, in my youth I played the role of sweetheart, and then when an actor gets older, he plays the parts that fit his age, I mean, elderly characters. Sometimes, when we were young, we played the roles of old people to prepare ourselves for the future.

##

VOA INTERVIEW WITH TAHIA KARIOKA

Ladies and gentlemen, good evening and we welcome you with tonight's guest, the artist, Tahia Karioka.

Thank you.

Of course I'd like to start by asking the artist, Tahia Karioka, about theater, because it's one of her main concerns. Now about the Tahia Karioka Group, what year was it formed?

It was formed in 1961.

So it's in its 17th year now?

Yes, it's closing in on its 17th year.

Could you give us an overview of the group's activities during that period?

The truth is, when we first formed the group, we were like travelers, because we didn't have a theater – or actually – they wouldn't give us one, so we traveled around the country. For example, we worked in Upper Egypt, starting from Beni Suef and the Fayoum all the way to Aswan. And, of course, we didn't have enough money, so we were all like scouts, we'd take the set apart, folding it up and loading it onto the train. We'd work in hospitals or in schools, anywhere. One time, we were working in a place, and I asked: "What are these tables? They're made of zinc and they're creaking." So they told me: "This is a hospital." And I asked: "What hospital is this?" and they replied, "The General Hospital. Didn't you see the three corpses in the room you were changing in?"

You mean sometimes the group's place was a hospital?

We worked in a hospital without even knowing it, but actually, those were the good days and we know it now; they really were good days. The audience would see us to the train station and wait with us for hours, and we'd say to them: "We'll be back next year," and they'd reply: "No, next year is too far away." Would you believe that we were the only group to go to Upper Egypt and that no group went to the frontline except us? For us, not having a theater was better, because at least we got to go everywhere and see everything.

After 17 years, are you happy with what your group performed?

Yes, of course. I mean, we only did one bad play the whole time.

Which one was that?

It was *Lukandit Shar al-Asal* (The Honeymoon Hotel) and, actually, it did have a good cast.

Then why was it bad?

They didn't perform their roles well; the cast included the famous trio, and we were the first to hire them at the Deif's Trio theater, God rest his soul.

And George Sidhom.

And Samir and George, and it was a flop.

Fayez Halawa and Tahia Karioka are considered a famous duo in the world of theater. If you hadn't met Mr. Fayez Halawa and you weren't a duo, do you think you would also have achieved the same success separately?

Who knows? Fayez may have been a reason why I grew to love the theater even more. At first I grew to love the theater because of Mr. Nagib al-Rihani, after I performed with him in *Libat al-Sit* (The Woman's Game). I really loved theater because of him; and I rehearsed with him, but sadly, he died. So when Fayez came along, he made me get back into theater a little bit more, and we've been doing well since.

Alright, have you added anything to him? I mean, he was the one who made you really love theater.

I honestly don't know. You'd have to ask him.

And what's cinema to you now?

Cinema, for me, was always was a secondary concern. After I quit being a dancer, I moved onto acting, and I didn't have anything to do with cinema. You don't feel about cinema the same way you do about theater. Theater is grand. I could have a temperature of 40, but when I'd feel the audience's excitement, I would pull it together, be strong and get to work. I worked once with a broken leg in a plaster cast, but I didn't feel anything. I only felt the pain after the play. The truth is that I would sit and cry and scream from the pain, but as long as I was on stage, I wouldn't feel a thing at all.

And all of this is basically because of the audience's presence?

Yes, of course. As long as the audience loves you, you feel that you can sacrifice anything for them.

Does the audience of Tahia Karioka have certain characteristics that make it like this particular kind of theater, or can it go see any play and enjoy it?

No. I think that our audience is of a certain kind. It's not the kind of audience that likes serious things. Once we performed a story called: *Umm al-Arousa* (Mother of the Bride) by al-Sahhar, which contained some criticism. The audience was angry and said: "What is this?" They weren't happy at all; even though the story was good, but when you discuss it with them, they say "No, that's not your style. We want to see something like your usual style."

Even if the story presented something serious in the form of a comedy?

It's not a question of presenting something comical; the audience wants the hot issues that Faye Halawa presents. It wants this kind of material, not just laughter and dancing for entertainment. *Umm al-Arousa* was about family planning and how an employee should not have more than two or three children. But this kind of material does not interest the audience; our group has its own special style, and we shouldn't cross this line.

And what are your future plans regarding theater?

Faye has several things in mind, like *Eh el-Ibara?* (What's the Matter?), *Ila al-Yasar Dur* (To the Left, Turn) and *Sayyedi al-Sanam* (My Master, the Statue). So he has three stories, and he's told me to wait a while.

##

VOA INTERVIEW WITH MOHAMED TAWFIK

Dear listeners, today we're introducing a personality that the listener has always wanted to meet. Our guest has greatly influenced the course of drama, radio, cinema and academic works. He's an Egyptian artist who studied art in one of the largest drama institutes in the world. He has dedicated his whole life to art for more than half a century, and he still has much to offer, even though he's in his 80s. He's the artist, producer, and actor, Mr. Mohamed Hassan Tawfik Mansuri al-Ogezi. The following is an interview with our correspondent in Cairo, Hassan Shams El Din, and the great actor, in a bid to shed further light on his extensive artistic career. The first question to Mohamed Tawfik was about his childhood, and he said:

The period I spent in Helwan when I was a child had a desert-like effect on me, because Helwan was almost a desert. We were living on the outskirts of Helwan in a valley now known as Wadi Hof. When I was a child, I used to walk in the valley, climb the mountains, and make friends with the cameleers. It seems that having grown up in the desert heightened my senses. The desert is a tranquil setting, where the moon joyfully beams at night, and its brightness reflects off the surface of the sand, making it seem as though it's glowing. It's a very strange atmosphere that gives you an artistic feeling. It awakens the artistic sense in you in an indirect way. Art is the appreciation of aesthetic beauty.

Some persons must have had an impact on you and on your inner soul?

There is an atmosphere other than that the aspect of beauty: I used to accompany my father on his visits to the great poet Hafez Ibrahim, and Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Beshri. Both of them were our neighbors. The gatherings were also attended by Imam Mustafa al-Maghrabi, God rest his soul. Political gatherings also used to be held at the homes of Hamdi Seif al-Nasr or Ahmed Khashaba Pasha, God rest his soul. I often used to attend these gatherings, which were very serious. I was affected by the participating personalities, who were formidable figures that commanded a great deal of respect.

What effect did the poet Hafez Ibrahim have on you?

Hafez Ibrahim's lectures were very eloquent and humorous, because they were attended by Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Beshri and the very funny Mohamed al-Bably. They were seminars of poetry and were full of good-natured, funny and decent jokes.

Have you ever tried to write?

I wrote my first story and took it shyly to Hafez's house one evening—

—Professor Hafez Ibrahim?

Yes, my father had once taken me to his house. I went to his house behind my father's back, and told him that I'd written a four-page story and said: "Can you read it, and, if you like it, would you publish it?" He laughed and took the story from me. About ten or twelve days later, he told me that my story would be published the next week in the

Kawkab Asharq newspaper. So, I waited, and then found my story published in two and a half or three columns, I can't remember. Hafez edited the story and corrected all the mistakes in linguistics, grammar and style. He did this to encourage me. I was the happiest man, and I was proud of my story for nearly two or three years.

When and how did your talent for acting reveal itself?

The beginning was when I was in elementary school. I started by attending English and Arabic reading classes. We used to read from a book called: *Al-Rasheeda fil Qaseeda* (The Rational Reading in a Poem). I can only recall some of its words, about the beauty of the sky and the moon. You're taking me back half a century. I can't remember everything. The ability to follow a dialogue began to develop in me, and I began to adapt to my surroundings and to stand out. The teachers encouraged us. When we had a modest party at school we recited some poems or simple monologues. I wish I could remember some of them... "I have spent the days of my life and my soul recalls difficulties and hardships"; the poem was called *Anta Ibn Mann?* (Whose Son Are You?), and that was the closing line. I don't remember it well; this was half a century ago.

I finished school in Helwan and moved on to secondary school. I joined the Al-Awqaf Royal secondary school, which is now the Ad-Dawawin school located on Khairat Street. I don't know whether they changed it or not. At this school, there were artistic activities. Among the people who taught us art in these schools was Professor Mohamed Abdul Wahab, who was young at the time, and he used to teach us music. I joined this section along with Sheikh Mustafa Amin and Ali Amin, God rest their souls. We were attending music class, and then we decided to form an acting troupe. They appointed Professor Ahmed Allam as the supervisor of our troupe.

##