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Farag, Alfred Morquos

By: Abdul-Latif, Emad

(1929–2005),

playwright, was born in Egypt's Al Sharqiya governorate to a middle-class family. His father was a government employee, and his mother died when he was five years old. He completed his primary and secondary education in Alexandria, then studied English literature at the University of Farouk I (after 1952 known as the University of Alexandria). After graduating in 1949, he worked as an English teacher for six years but abandoned this work for a career in the press. In 1959 he was arrested on charges of belonging to a leftist organization and spent five years in jail. For ten years following his release, Farag served in various posts in official cultural institutions in Egypt. However, he was forced to leave Egypt in 1973 following a clash between President Muhammad Anwar al-Sadat and Egyptian intellectuals. Over the course of fourteen years, Farag lived in various countries including Algeria, England, and Germany. In 1987 he returned to Egypt and resumed his career in the press at *Al-Mosawer* magazine. He later joined the team of *Al-Ahram* newspaper, where he remained until his death on 4 December 2005. In 1957 he married Thouraya Ibrahim Al-Ogeizy. They had no children.

Farag is considered one of the most prominent Arab playwrights in the second half of the twentieth century. His first play, *The Voice of Egypt* (1956), deals with the people's resistance in the Suez War. Yet his fame resulted from a series of plays inspired by historical figures and tales that addressed social problems in the Arab world during the 1950s and 1960s. In his play *A Pharaoh's Downfall* (1957), the character of Akhenaten, the famous pharaoh king, was considered a literary mask for then-president Gamal Abd al-Nasser. In addition, Farag depicted new dimensions of the problematic relationship between knowledge and power in his play *Sulayman Al-Halabi* (1966) through the character of Al-Halabi, the scholar of Al-Azhar, who murders Kleber, the French commander who succeeded Napoleon in ruling Egypt. Likewise, his play *Al-Zayr Salim* (1967) resurrected the well-known historical figure of Al-Zayr Salim to approach the complex relationship between power and knowledge after the Egyptian Revolution. Farag was inspired by many classical Arabic stories. In his plays *The Barber of Baghdad* (1964) and *Ali Jannah Al-Tabrizi and His Servant Quffa* (1969), he reproduced Arabic stories from the Middle Ages. His interest in highlighting current problems in society through historical figures is a prominent feature of Farag's political theater. Therefore, it was not surprising that his theater was referred to as the Theater of Political Masks.

Besides his political plays, Farag wrote social comedy plays. *Soldiers and Thieves* (1966) provided satirical treatment of corruption in the state institution. Similarly, *Marriage on a Divorce Notification* (1973) underscored marital problems that resulted from disparities in spouses' social classes. In the 1990s, Farag wrote many social comedy plays, the most important of which are *The Love Songs of Atwa Abu Matwa* (1993) and *The Kind, the Evil, and the Beautiful* (1994). He also wrote a play that belongs to the theater of resistance called *Fire and Olives* (1970), which deals with the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. This is in addition to two children's plays, *Lazy Bokbok* (1966) and *Rahma and the Lazy Prince of the Forest* (1977).

Farag's interest in the theater was not confined to writing but also included theorizing. In 1966 he published a book titled *Directory of the Smart Spectator to Theatre-Study*, which contains his ideas on the art of theater. In addition, he published a number of books such as *The Spotlight* (1989) and *East and West* (1990), which collect his printed articles about literature in general and theater in particular. Farag also translated a number of Western plays and wrote about

them in books such as *The Lights of Western Theatre* (1989). He gave lectures on Arab theater in Western universities including Exeter, Oxford, the University of Berlin, New York University, and the University of Pennsylvania.

In addition to his plays and critical studies, Farag wrote two novels: *The Story of the Lost Time in an Egyptian Village* (1977) and *The Days and Nights of Sinbad* (1987). He also produced two collections of short stories: *A Collection of Short Stories* (1968) and *The Letters of the Judge of Seville* (1981). Farag served in a variety of posts; between 1973 and 1979, he worked as a counselor to the Algerian television organization in Oran, then as a counselor to the Ministry of Higher Education in the same country. He also lectured in many universities, including the universities of London, Exeter, and Oxford. In addition, he worked as a news editor and columnist at several Arabic magazines and newspapers. He wrote a number of series for Egyptian and Syrian television.

Many of Farag's plays were translated into English, Polish, and German, and staged in Egypt, Algeria, England, Poland, Jordan, Libya, Tunisia, Iraq, Kuwait, Syria, and Germany. He received several important awards and medals, including the Jerusalem Award (Syria 2001), the State Distinction Award in Literature (Egypt 1993), the Science and Arts Medal of the first order (Egypt 1967, 1993), the Al-Oweis Prize for Literature (UAE 1992), the State Incentive Award for Theatre Writing (Egypt 1965), and the gold medal from the Supreme Council of Arts and Literature (Egypt 1956) for his first play, *The Voice of Egypt*.

[See also AKHENATEN; Nasser, Gamal Abd al-; and Sadat, Muhammad Anwar al-]

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