

Interview Edited Transcription

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Fleishman:

This is an interview with Raphael Cormack on 4 September 2020. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research and agreeing to spend some time with us. So our questions start off with looking at tragedy as understood as the actual plays themselves as originally written in ancient tragedy in the sense in the fifth century kind of era. And how these have been picked up in particularly African contexts. And here we are specifically thinking about Egypt. So you had a number of productions that you were particularly interested in, can you just say what the title of the production was.

Cormack:

So one production that we can talk about, which I believe to be the first production of a classical Greek tragedy in Egypt, is in the 1912. George Abyad's version of *The Oedipus Tyrannos*. So in the 19th century and early 20th century, there had been a number of classical productions, but they were all I believe, based on French, you know, Racine, that sort of French neoclassical reworkings of classical plays, like Racine, and there was Voltaire and this kind of thing, but in 1912, this actor George Abyad, who was actually of sort of Lebanese heritage, who'd come to Egypt, had been sent by the Khedive of Egypt to Paris, to study theatre where he sort of- he trained with Eugène Silvain, a French actor at the Comédie-Française. There's some speculation over whether he'd actually been to the Comédie-Française to train but I think he hadn't been to the Conservatoire. Anyway, he comes back in 1912 to put on [a play], sort of billed as a huge landmark production, the first Arabic translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus*, he does it alongside a few other plays, including an Arabic translation of *Othello* performed at the main opera house to a kind of audience of notables, so the sort of ruler of Egypt is there among several other politicians, the kind of important people from the region and there- so it's quite interesting (*computer audio glitch*) heavily involved in kind of singing. So the songs were one of the most important parts of theatre and one of the most famous actor kind of producers, was this man called Salama Higazi, who in every play, he performed were put in these big sort of musical numbers. And he wrote songs for the play George Abyad - this French trained

actor, performed the main role of Oedipus. And it was billed as this huge event to kind of, if you want, I can talk a little bit more about the reception.

Fleishman:

Can we just hold off on the reception for the moment? So do you know any of the other performers, the names of the other performers that were involved in the production?

Cormack:

I don't have them at my fingertips now. I think Milia Dayan played for this, Jocasta. Though it might have been Mariam Sumat. There are, I mean, I can get them to you later because I'm pretty sure I can get access to the article that goes through the list of performers.

Fleishman:

Okay. And it was performed, it's an Arabic translation- so it was performed in Arabic?

Cormack:

Yeah, it's an Arabic translation done by a writer called Farah Antun, who is also quite famous as a newspaper kind of journal, novelist, kind of political thinker who's an early Arab socialist. Done from, French I'd say, probably from French, French text, not from the Greek itself, but yeah in Arabic.

Fleishman:

And do you think there was a particular kind of sense that this was an event in the sense of that this was being done in Arabic and not in say English or French as the case may be?

Cormack:

Yeah, definitely there is a story, which is probably apocryphal, that the great nationalist Egyptian leader is called Saad Zaghloul, who in a few years after this kind of led a revolution against the British, but he was Education Minister and there's this kind of a story that Saad Zaghloul himself, went to George Abyad, and said, you really need to be performing in Arabic, you know, we know you can do it in French, but it's gonna be good for the country if people can do it in Arabic. But that's probably slightly exaggerated. But there are articles in French newspapers interviewing George Abyad, in which he specifically says I want to come home and do this in Arabic.

Fleishman:

So it's part of a kind of nationalistic agenda to build up the concept of an Egyptian national culture, in a modern sense.

Cormack:

I mean, it could certainly be read that way. Yeah.

Fleishman:

Yeah. And do you have a sense why this particular Greek tragedy? Do you think he chose *Oedipus* for a particular reason?

Cormack:

I mean, this is slightly speculation, we don't have him explaining why he chose it. I think he probably did it because he was influenced by Mounet-Sully's, *Oedipus*, which was big in the early 20th century in Paris where he was, and that was sort of one of the big plays going around. There are pictures of the performers in which his dress is clearly influenced by that *Oedipus*, in the costume.

Fleishman:

So do you think there's a kind of tension between the conceptual - the concept of the staging, let's say and the choice of Arabic. On the one hand, the choice of Arabic might be pointing towards a kind of more political agenda. But it sounds like the production might have followed very much what you might have seen in the French classical theatre context.

Cormack:

Yeah. And that is one of the big tensions of Arabic cultural production in this period, that sort of 1910s, 20s, 30s, it's often more implicit than explicit. More in the 50s and 60s, it becomes more of an explicit concern. In this period, there's this tension between whether to sort of follow Europe or whether to tread a sort of, specifically Egyptian path, and yeah, people are constantly debating it and never quite figure out the answer. They, in the case of this play, yeah the tension is perhaps more obvious than others, because a lot of the times people say that they are following Europe some of the reviewers say, oh, with this play we're kind of catching up to Europe.

Fleishman:

Mm.

Cormack:

But they're also trying to sort of make it a specifically Egyptian and kind of, as we've already discussed, has a sort of nationalist kind of a reasoning behind it. But that tension is there and in so much of this stuff in this period.

Fleishman:

And in terms of the design elements, and that? Do you have sense from the pictures, like do you feel it was very influenced by the production that he would have seen in France?

Cormack:

That's why I said, there are not that many pictures that survived of that. Probably the original production no pictures of it survived, but he did keep doing this play well into the 1940s.

Fleishman:

Oh.

Cormack:

So some pictures of those productions did survive and clearly his costume is based on Mounet-Sully, like it's almost one for one.

Fleishman:

So, can we go back to the music which you said was in it, can you speak a little bit more about how do you think the music operated within the production? And do you think it was an essential addition to the tragic conception? Or do you think it was more a pulling away from that in an attempt to make it more popular or accessible in some kind of way?

Cormack:

Well, I mean, the obvious parallel would be the Greek chorus.

Fleishman:

Yeah.

Cormack:

They're not specifically trying to engage with the Greek chorus. I mean, the songs aren't translations or even kind of riffs on the choral verses in the play, they're written separately normally for most

plays and for this play too. So they tend to come, I mean I suppose, this is as the Greek chorus, they come in roughly the same place and the moments of these high tension.

Fleishman:

Mm.

Cormack:

But they're made to make the plays more popular with the general audience, I think the audiences would have demanded it. (*computer audio glitch*) There is a story of a production of *Hamlet* being put on by Salama Higazi, who is the same guy who wrote the songs for this play, and there were no songs in that production of *Hamlet*. And at the end, the audience complains and starts chanting, we need another act.

Fleishman:

(*Laughs*).

Cormack:

If you're not going to give us any songs. And songs would often be released on record, songs (*computer audio glitch*)... as a large part of its justification. So a large part of the justification will be to appeal to the audience but how they work within the play itself, I suppose is more interesting, particularly within the context of a Greek tragedy where there are places for songs to be. I mean, a complicated issue, most probably moments of high tension. The one thing that they do do in relation to our previous discussion, is they give a much more kind of Egyptian element although the play itself is it's kind of based on this text by Sophocles, via the French. These songs were made up by Salama Higazi, written by him and much more in the local style. And others have written on this, I forget the person who wrote the article, but other songs in relation to *Romeo and Juliet*. A lot of the songs that were added to that play are very, very much within a kind of Arabic love energy style. So they bring much more of the kind of local context into the play.

Fleishman:

If we can shift to the reception then, how was it received and was it very class bound? It happening at the Opera House, was it very much an elite event?

Cormack:

Yes, essentially yes. And although, as I said before he keeps putting this play on for 30 years after or more even after the first production. It never quite becomes a popular hit. It's always more seen by sort of, you know, upper class more elite perhaps sort of also bourgeois intellectuals as a great moment of Arabic literature- 'we're putting *Oedipus* on in Arabic'. This at the time they say 'oh this is finally sort of proper theatre, real serious theatre being put on'. But it never really captured the public's imagination. I mean, it runs for a little bit, he sometimes twice every couple of years, he puts on another version, but it doesn't ever seem to be his most in demand play.

Fleishman:

Mm...and in different venues?

Cormack:

In different venues, yeah. So George Abyad himself, he built his own theatre in the late 1910s, early 1920s, which doesn't last that long. And he puts it on there. In the 40s there's a version of this play, which was broadcast on the radio, which actually is still on YouTube (you can listen to it) and some other venues. And the theatre at the time was very kind of slapdash, you put on a play wherever you had the chance to put it on. If you get the money together, you put it on there. He just happened to be, for this performance, sponsored by the ruling city, so he had a good source of money for that.

Fleishman:

But that changed. So that was 1912. Right?

Cormack:

Yeah.

Fleishman:

It was still a British colony as you will or whatever the political thing was but was under the control of Britain, but by the time- well 1922 was it that Egypt becomes kind of independent -and in that post 22 period, if he's redoing the production does it change at all?

Cormack:

No. And in that period, it doesn't get put on that much, I mean that in the 20s and 30s. He tried to push it a lot in the 10s and then it doesn't go. I mean, the structure of who pays for theatre does change a little bit by the 1930s, the Egyptian government are paying for some theatre, but not that much. And it's a constant complaint on the part of actors that the new government is not funding Arabic theatre enough.

Fleishman:

But you said it went on as late as 1944?

Cormack:

Yeah, it does but sporadically. So there is an attempt again in the 1940s to put on this script, but not with George Abyad, by Taha Hussein who is a very important person in the reception of Greek tragedy who we could mention but I don't know if you want to get into that.

Fleishman:

Yeah, please go ahead.

Cormack:

He trained at Cairo University and then did a PhD in the Sorbonne. He comes back to Egypt at the beginning of the 1920s and starts, as well as teaching, sorry, at the end of the 1910s as well as teaching classics, starts translating *a lot* of Greek tragedy into Arabic, intended not specifically for performance, although some of the scripts are performed. He starts translating Sophocles and also Aristotle. Started translating a lot of these and really pushing the Greek heritage as part of the Egyptian heritage too. And he really gets stuck into these debates that we were talking about earlier about, whether it's European, whether it's kind of a part of Egyptian heritage, to what extent can Egyptians claim Greek tragedy as their own, he is probably the first person to really open up (*computer audio glitch*).

Fleishman:

And what was his opinion?

Cormack:

It's inconsistent, but broadly that Egypt was part of a kind of Eastern Mediterranean culture, he didn't use those specific terms. And that this history is as much theirs to claim as it is anyone else's to claim.

Fleishman:

Mm.

Cormack:

But he sometimes gets tangled up in knots a little bit.

Fleishman:

So he's seeing it not as a reception of some kind of foreign body of work, but essentially part of the broader classical heritage that Egyptians can claim.

Cormack:

Yeah. This isn't about either Egyptians can claim as part of their own, which sometimes he specifically says for instance, he does a calculation about sort of constitution of the Athenians in which he notes that the papyrus itself was discovered in Egypt. So, it's kind of theirs. Other times he more sees Greece as this kind of universal global culture.

Fleishman:

Okay.

Cormack:

That's open to anyone. He writes about this kind of topic for 30 or 40 years, so his views shift. But not only does he see this as something that Egyptians can definitely claim but he's also extremely committed to Arabic language culture and Arabic heritage too. He really juggles these issues. And also does a huge amount of the translations, which people still today consider to be the best translations of a lot of these tragic texts.

Fleishman:

You spoke about a second production, a later production of *Oedipus* that you wanted to talk about. What is that?

Cormack:

Yeah, so this is a production of Ali Salim's *Comedy of Oedipus* otherwise known as *You're the one who killed the Beast*¹, which is done in 1970. And then this kind of talking about this production can bring us into the much more sort of post 1952 revolution for the, sort of, Nasserist receptions of what Greek tragedy can be. So this one, it was a script. The basic story is a script written by this comic playwright, Ali Salim, in the late 60s. He had been extremely influenced by a book by Immanuel Velikovsky, called *Oedipus and Akhnaton*, which has been written in, I forget when I think it might have been in the 40s or 50s, but had been translated into Arabic in the 60s. And he had read that and the basic argument in that is that Oedipus was in fact, Egyptian I think, the myth of Oedipus is based on the actual Pharaoh Akhenaten. So he, Ali Salim, takes that up slightly ironically and then sets the whole myth of Oedipus. He reworks it, sets it in Egyptian Thebes and turns it much more into a sort of comedy. Interestingly, musical numbers are a big part of it as (*computer audio glitch*)...

Fleishman:

You're just disappearing for a moment.

Cormack:

(*computer audio glitch*)... sorry he turns them both into a sort of comic reworking of *Oedipus* and a critique of the Nasserist police force, basically.

Fleishman:

So this one has an underlying political kind of thing going on?

¹ The Comedy of Oedipus: You Who Killed the Beast!

Cormack:

Yeah, both in terms of this sort of a slightly exaggerated for comic effects, nationalist (*computer audio glitch*)... political critiques about Nasser². Am I cutting out?

Fleishman:

Yeah.

Cormack:

I can try-

Fleishman:

Yeah, that's fine. Carry on. I can hear you now.

Cormack:

Well, so it's political in two ways. One, in that it's a kind of comically exaggerated nationalist reappropriation of the *Oedipus* story for Egypt. But also, there are specific political comments made about both Nasser and also sort of his secret police and the people's support for him, which the play sees as slightly naive, misguided couched in certain terms. I mean, people have tried to see the ancient Greece or ancient Egyptian setting as a way to hide these messages but I think it's a) pretty obvious, b) the play makes jokes inside the play itself about people using poetry to try and code for political messages.

Fleishman:

And have you seen images from that production? I mean, it's more recent. Yeah?

Cormack:

So yeah, there are images of that production that were in the local press and the director in his Arabic memoirs, which were released in Egypt in, I think, in 90s - 2000s, reproduces a lot of pictures from that production. It's slightly wild, sort of semi ancient Egyptian, semi modern, kind of mishmash. So, halfway through the play one of the conceits is that, Oedipus, who is in control of the managers to modernise the country and take it forward 2000 years, I forget what it says. And so halfway through the play all this modern technology starts appearing, you know, radios and TV shows and things like that. (*computer audio glitch*)... the Tiresias character who people said look like one of the Beatles. It was also an English translation of the play was performed in 20 - I want to say 15- it could be in the 2010s in London at the Unicorn Pub.

Fleishman:

By who? Who did that?

Cormack:

I'm blanking on his name now, an Egyptian director.

Fleishman:

Based in the UK? Or he came to the UK to do it?

Cormack:

Based in the UK.

Fleishman:

Okay.

² Former President of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser Hussein.

Cormack:

I'm gonna see if I can find details of that. In 2013, Ahmed El-Alfy he's called, the El-Alfy theatre company³. E-L- dash-A-L-F-Y.

Fleishman:

Yeah. And you said there was music involved in this one as well?

Cormack:

Yeah, yeah. According to the writer, it actually all started with an idea for a song.

Fleishman:

And did you have a sense of what kind of music that was?

Cormack:

Sort of, a lot like reasonably comic music of the time: nice little ditties.

Fleishman:

Okay, so it wasn't like it suddenly sprung into rock musicals or anything like that in the 1970s.

Cormack:

No.

Fleishman:

(Laughs).

Cormack:

(Laughs) No, no.

Fleishman:

So are there any other any other particular productions of any of these Greek tragedies that you want to just point to briefly before we move on?

Cormack:

So where you can really start to get in good solid information and nice pictures and kind of the easily accessible reviews of productions comes in the 1960s. And that is quite a big burst of the classical plays, put on in the 1960s. So, there's another translator called Louis Awad, who was the student of Taha Hussein, who we mentioned earlier, in that sort of 1920s, 30s, Dean of Arabic literature. He translated *Aeschylus, Agamemnon, Choephoroi*, into Arabic, and a few of those productions were put on in Cairo, one of them using the Greek director, Takis Mouzenidis.

Fleishman:

Mm.

Cormack:

He I think put on the *Agamemnon* or *Choephoroi* in the National Theatre, big production of which pictures survive in, I guess some magazines for the AGPRD library, which have pictures of that production.

Fleishman:

³ <http://elalfytheatre.com/>

Okay.

Cormack:

Yeah and it was a it was a big deal at this time and there were several kinds of- in the 60s the Nasserist government really tried to promote theatre. I mean, there was a really big theatre boom at the time. Not only by... There were people sponsoring it, but also lots of new writers coming in influences from Brecht, was particularly big. There's lots of kind of this new wave of theatre and so that there's two sort of main theatres where classical plays are put on. One is the big National Theatre where Takis Mouzenidis version of *Aeschylus* was put on and the other was called the Pocket Theatre which had more kind of experimental plays, smaller audiences, slightly more higher minded and that is where Louis Awad's *Agamemnon* was put on to a smaller crowd.

Fleishman:

Mm, mm.

Cormack:

There are other things going on with, there was at least one version of *Antigone*. There's much more engagement with the classical plays and much more easily accessible in this sort of 50s and 60s period. Because theatre becomes this real, one of the sort of big centre pieces of sort of Egyptian cultural production of the times.

Fleishman:

And with the specifically nationalistic agenda, I mean Nasser is putting money into the arts because he thinks the arts are going to push a particular ideology or a particular government policy of some kind.

Cormack:

Yeah, I mean, maybe it's not quite so simple as that but essentially, yes. And you know, to sort of, specifically nationalistic for the kind of it's the great glory of Nasser's regime to be able to put on these great plays. A lot of the theatre, you know a lot of the playwrights were arrested and sort of put in prison.

Fleishman:

(Laughs).

Cormack:

It's not quite as kind of one to one is that. One of the, there all these loads of stories, I think Alfred Farag, one of the big playwrights who wrote his greatest play on cigarette papers in prison and all the prisoners get together and do a performance of it, which he claims is the best performance of it that was ever done. I think that sort (*computer audio glitch*). There's a book on Alfred Farag, by Dina Amin, that goes into that story.

Fleishman:

So there seems to be if there's more money happening, more productions happening, but also seemingly quite a lot of what's the word, like government clamped down on dissident voices in some ways-

Cormack:

I should mention sorry before that, that the *Comedy of Oedipus* itself was stopped after a few performances.

Fleishman:

Okay.

Cormack:

Because it was beginning to be a bit dodgy politically.

Fleishman:

(Laughs) But is that by, do you think that's by design in the sense that the director wants it to be that or more that it's just a skittish kind of government looking seeing ghosts behind every or in every cupboard or every... you know what I mean?

Cormack:

Yeah. I mean, the play *Comedy of Oedipus*- is definitely critical of the whole Egyptian political system, it tries to not be critical of Nasser himself. I mean, as a lot of people were doing at the time, a sort of one argument is of Nasser is trying to do this great job but the whole system that has been built around him is corrupt or doesn't quite work. (computer audio glitch) If the *Comedy of Oedipus* play is a critique of Nasser too, which it seems to be, it sticks to that line to. The Oedipus character if he is Nasser is trying to do this great job but his chief of police is a bad guy or messed up. So maybe they thought they were treading sort of that line and that it'll be okay. Or maybe they just yeah, it was sort of slightly it was wanting to be seen as critical after.

Fleishman:

And you spoke earlier about the Hakim version, play that was not performed but written as theatre of the mind. Do you want to just talk about that a little bit.

Cormack:

So in 1912, the play that we talked about was essentially under a British colonial government. And the 1970 play is the end really of the sort of post-colonial Nasser regime. So those are two big moments in Egyptian theatre. But in the 1940s there were a large number of versions of *Oedipus Rex*, which is the play I know most about. So in 1949, which the political situation at that point is post Second World War. Again, as we said, Egypt is officially independent in 1922, but the British still maintain a lot of control in the Suez Canal for one and also more nebulously and in government. During the Second World War, the British had really moved in and sort of forced the nominally independent Egyptian government to toe the war line in the aftermath, that this huge sort of political chaos in the late 1940s and early 1950s, which leads to the revolution in '52. But in this period of sort of, it's the rise of importance of the Muslim Brotherhood for a while and then the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood is assassinated, also prime ministers are assassinated. There's a lot of political assassinations going on at the time and it's in this kind of moment that two versions of *Oedipus* are used, are written in fact, though not specifically for production. And I think neither of them were produced in any significant manner. So there's Tawfiq al-Hakim does a version of *Oedipus* in which he sort of rewrites it for an Egyptian audience, including a long introduction about how one can rewrite Greek tragedy as what he calls himself as an Easterner and what the kind of issues at play there are, which we'll talk about in a second, but I'll just mentioned briefly also as another version of *Oedipus* written by Ali Ahmed Bakathir who is sort of Yemeni origin but has moved to Egypt in the 20s/30s. Probably loosely affiliated with The Muslim Brotherhood but that's again slightly unclear. That is a version of *Oedipus* in which basically, he calls the powers of Thebes as it was corrupt, the temple powers are all corrupt and then making money and Tiresias is a sort of proto Islamic almost prophet, who guides *Oedipus* towards this sort of new way of thinking about the world which is essentially Islamic and then the play ends actually with *Oedipus* leaving the city but having instituted a sort of a new world being on the, on the edge of being born.

Fleishman:

Mm.

Cormack:

So they're both interesting engagements with *Oedipus* done at this extremely tense political time in Egypt. And both of them were engaging with (*computer audio glitch*)... the specifics of ways of being Egyptian at this time or what it might be?

Fleishman:

And they were not produced do you think because of the political tension?

Cormack:

I think Ali Ahmed Bakathir's one, I think can be read as sort of direct comment on all this political tension. Perhaps some kind of support for the Muslim Brotherhood that might be overreaching, but at least it's a comment on the corruption of late 1940s political system. Tawfiq al-Hakim less so, although there's a lot of that political stuff is kind of in there but it's not foregrounded.

Fleishman:

So, I just want to shift a little bit here and maybe you can answer this and maybe you can't. But as I understand it there's this tension, which is also a tension that we have here in South Africa, where you are of the continent but not as such. So as you describe there al-Hakim is writing about himself as an Easterner, right? So he's locating himself or orientating himself, very specifically to the Middle East, that kind of area. And he's saying, this is how I would approach doing a Greek tragedy. That's what I'm understanding from you, as such a person. Was there this other pressure to- I mean, there comes that period in the like 1960s, where in terms of African politics, there's a strong feeling to include the Maghreb region in the pan African kind of context, whereas, you know, there were people who were saying, no, they don't have anything to do with Africa. Is there any sense in which there is a kind of sense of an African heritage at all in any of the theatrical production that you came across? Or is it all oriented away from the continent towards this Mediterranean culture or this Arabic culture?

Cormack:

My sense is, is the latter, that people don't really have the sense of Egypt in these production/ plays that are trying to have a sense of Egypt as a kind of African nation dealing with Greek tragedy. I just talk a little bit more about that, I would say before 1950 basically, there's very little sense of Egypt as an African nation, sort of at all. I don't know, if you've read Eve Troutt Powell's *A Different shade of Colonialism*.

Fleishman:

Mm-mm [no].

Cormack:

She talks a lot about Egypt's relationship with Sudan, as a kind of sort of quasi-colonial relationship. Where Egypt is being colonised by Britain, and in turn Egypt sort of replays a lot of those dynamics on Sudan. That pre 1950, I think you'd be hard pressed, I'm not saying it doesn't exist, you'd be hard pressed to find people who would challenge sort of that idea, and say no Egypt is as an African country. There's this famous quote from the Khedive Isma'il in the late 19th century, in which he says Egypt is no longer part of Africa, we've become European. Rehashing-

Fleishman:

European? (*laughs*)

Cormack:

- yeah, was part of Europe (*laughs*).

Fleishman:

Yeah.

Cormack:

After the 1950s you know, after Nasser, then it becomes more complicated because Nasser does have this big, or at least considerable, it might not be a central focus, but this idea of becoming more a part of Africa and all the third world more generally. He invites, you know, lots of kind of resistance, African resistance leaders as it were. Famously, Kwame Nkrumah married an Egyptian. I think Lumumba's kids spend some time in Egypt. Nasser tries to bring all of these sort of like big post-colonial leaders into Egypt into their orbit. Again, there's like, I mean, I have not looked into that much detail about this, there are some perhaps Neo-colonial aspects to that too. It's unclear whether or not Nasser sees them as partners or kind of juniors that he can lead. I don't know so much about that. So you would expect maybe that to show up in some of these theatrical adaptations, but I haven't seen it.

Fleishman:

Okay, and when you were doing your research, when was that particularly in the 20...

Cormack:

I started research on this project in around 2010, 2011. I actually started by looking at how Tawfiq al-Hakim who was the man who did the 1949 *Oedipus*, he tried to make it Eastern. He did a number of plays which were based on the Electra myth. And he had sort of some interesting takes on that, which I'm happy to talk about. And then I moved on to *Oedipus* the main focus of what I look at is from the late 19th century and sort of the 1960s, it doesn't go much beyond that.

Fleishman:

What I was trying to move towards was did you spend time in Cairo over this period?

Cormack:

Yeah.

Fleishman:

So, in the 2010 and onwards period that you were there. Were you aware of productions going on at the time that, did you see any that you personally experienced?

Cormack:

Yeah, I saw one production of *Antigone* in the Gumhoreyya Theatre which must have been, I'm guessing is 2015, around that time that was part of a Theatre Festival. I can try and find later exactly who was involved in it. It was curiously quite like the early 20th century or like previous Egyptian productions of Greek tragedy, it added song, it added a sort of a comic duo, there was this sort of comic Gods who were sort of delivering a slapstick humour and it ends in a sort of a kind of happy ending in which-

Fleishman:

(Laughs).

Cormack:

- Antigone and her lover instead of going into the cave to be buried to sort of share a final kiss scene at the end.

Fleishman:

(Laughs) So, and who was it, what kind of company was putting it on or was it...

Cormack:

It was part of a Theatre Festival and in which there must have been 30 or so plays. It was a big Theatre Festival in Cairo. I mean, it seemed like a young kind of upcoming company. I'd have to look into it to figure out who they were. I mean, another thing that I did see was a number of plays by El-Warsha theatre troupe, who talks a little bit about (*computer audio glitch*). They didn't do specifically any Greek tragedy, but what they do do is they're very interested in old Arabic sort of folktales and oral stories and *Siras* and when I was talking to Hassan El-Geretly he noted at least some of the similarities in the structure of these tales to Greek myth. I think that's a reasonably common deal among theatre producers in general, people like to make these connections between older myths, and in this case, Egyptian myths and folktales and Greek myths.

Fleishman:

So that's an interesting thing for me. Do you think that some of the attraction of these plays might be also informal as opposed to in terms of form rather than in terms of only the content or saying this is our heritage as well, or any of those kinds of sentiments, that there's something about the nature of Greek theatre, you know, the choral aspects maybe, the connection to myth, these kinds of things that might have been maybe even a ritual thing that maybe might be recognisable to an Egyptian audience, or theatre makers.

Cormack:

There's a, like I say, I think Hassan El-Geretly saw some of that. I would say one thing I looked at in the course of my research, which is not a play, but might speak to this is a 1904 translation of the *Iliad*, very interesting book, done by an Ottoman diplomat, Lebanese, but who was based in Cairo⁴. I think he was looking at epic as a form rather than specifically tragedy. He says in the introduction, at first he saw that Arabic had no epic, so he wanted to translate some of these great epics like, whatever, to give similar to Milton or Virgil, so he went back to Homer. But then later on in the introduction, he goes on to say that he saw a lot of similarities between this world and the way the stories are put together and the pre-Islamic and the post-Islamic epic tradition, which is called Sira, S-I-R-A. Which is... the sira tradition is something that El-Warsha and Hassan El-Geretly are also influenced by. So I think there's definitely people from 1904 till now have seen a connection between- Arabic- what is called Arabian epic, or folktale or whatever exactly, you want to call it. And both the form of Greek literature and also the environment in which it kind of grew up in. That's something for instance that the translator of the *Iliad*, Sulaiman Al-Bustani, talks about his, he sees the world of Greek epic, and the world of Arabic epic to be comparable.

Fleishman:

And I mean, it's interesting because Fiona Macintosh, who runs the APGRD, she's written a book recently on epic and the epic tradition and argues that she thinks the distinctions between genres like epic and tragedy were far less rigid, then has been made out since... well, in the reading of Aristotle, which makes the line very hard between them. And, and that's interesting to me a lot, because I think that's true here as well. I know that a colleague⁵ of mine here is working on a production at the moment based on the *Odyssey* and he's finding a very strong relationship with exactly what you're saying. He's like reading the *Odyssey* and saying, this feels like the world of Xhosa storytelling and in a kind of Southern African motif or paradigm. So I think that's an interesting thing, the way that I'm just interested to know whether it's all about whether the attraction to these plays is all about content, or whether there is something about the nature of the, the kind of dramaturgical

⁴ Sulaiman Al-Bustani's

⁵ Mandla Mbothwe

world if you like, or environmental and the aesthetics employed that somehow are easily relatable to audiences in various parts of the continent.

Cormack:

I think there's definitely something to that. I will just read a sort of if you want to argue against that. There's a very interesting set of articles written in the 1960s by this guy Yusuf Idris, who was a big short story writer who's now also a playwright and general journalist. It's called *Towards an Egyptian Theatre* published in 1964. (*computer audio glitch*)... Is there truly an Egyptian Theatre? Does it really exist? Where is it hiding if it does exist? etc. He goes (*computer audio glitch*)...

Fleishman:

You're breaking up again.

Cormack:

... so in this... hello, can you hear me now?

Fleishman:

Yeah, I can hear you now.

Cormack:

Okay, great. So in this collection of articles, he goes into ideas about the tragic and its relation to Egyptian theatre specifically and this is a time in which a lot of folk traditions have tried to be revived in people that tried to sort of post-colonial time, which is so similar in lots of post-colonial countries in which people have tried to go back to our use sort of pre-colonial, I don't think there's such a thing as pre-colonial, but like pre-colonial forms to figure out how they work. So he goes into specifically Egyptian tragic heroes, I'm looking now for the quote... So here it goes, "Idris" - I'm just reading a translation of my own that I put in my thesis in the play, but he says, taking Oedipus as an example, he says "Nothing confirms the fundamental difference between Egyptian theatre and Greek theatre (and from that European theatre) like our understanding of tragedy as a people". He goes on to say, "Greek tragedy is a kind of theatre in which the Greek wanted to portray the heroism of man as he resists or fights his fate. It always starts from the assumption that the hero is some accursed victim or that some divine fate has been written for him that he will kill his father, for example, and marry his mother". That's a quote on Greek tragedy and then he compares it to what he sees as the Egyptian tragic hero, which he says "Our tragic hero here, in Egypt, in the Arab world, or in the East in general is different. He is not the victim of some cruel or arbitrary fate. The hero here is a true hero, not for the heroic deeds that he does, but because he has his own fate in his hands and can guide his own life"⁶. So that's, I just thought that's an interesting engagement with Greek tragedy as an Egyptian extremely kind of post-colonial, not only in his attempt to find a sort of Egyptian form of tragedy, but also in this in this assertion that Egyptian heroes will guide their own fate. And all this very kind of like, the hope of the new post-colonial world in his interpretation of tragedy.

Fleishman:

Mm hmm. And do you think people would think the same today?

Cormack:

(*Laughs*) I doubt it.

Fleishman:

(*Laughs*) Yeah. And so, just to end off, can we just come back to this question of reception. This whole history of various productions, and they seem to be quite an extensive production history of

⁶ Idrīs, 'Towards an Egyptian Theatre', 636–37.

Greek tragedy being performed, staged, adapted, written and written about; how do- is there a sense of what the audience broadly whether this is just simply something arcane and sitting in you know, somewhere up there on in some kind of ivory tower or something that people actually engage with in a much more, I don't know, popular - I don't mean popular- in a more public way in a more public sphere way?

Cormack:

Yeah, I mean, always that's a difficult question to answer, but my sense is that although these are the writers really wanted people to engage with it in a popular way and had intellectual reasons why they thought they should. It was more seen as this kind of ivory tower, sort of distinct culture than they really incorporated. I mean, there are a lot of people saying you guys really should get into this.

Fleishman:

(Laughs).

Cormack:

But it's unclear really how far that message was taken up. I mean, a lot of the history of 20th century engagement with Greece is in Egypt, is people trying to find intellectual justification for why this should matter?

Fleishman:

Okay.

Cormack:

But, but maybe not ever actually really succeeding. I mean, you need more than that.

Fleishman:

Okay, well thank you...

Cormack:

(Laughing) That's might not be what you wanted to hear.

Fleishman:

No, no.

Cormack:

It might not be true as well, I mean.

Fleishman:

You know, obviously, we need to, I mean it seems to me that there are these responses. I mean, anyway, it's very difficult to understand how people are responding unless you're actually in the auditorium, with them while they're responding.

Cormack:

Yeah, and that's only my rough sense it might be. I mean, other people might have a different sense of that.

Fleishman:

I mean, Iman⁷ said to me, Egyptian theatre is European Theatre, she said to me *(laughs)*. Do you know what I mean, in a kind of quite straightforward way. So I don't know whether she's just being

⁷ Dr Iman Ezzeldin

provocative or whether she is... (*laughs*). But you know, there's a sense that there isn't much distinction between what a production of a Greek tragedy would look like in Egypt and what it would look like even today.

Cormack:

Yeah, that's probably fair to say.

Fleishman:

Whereas-

Cormack:

- to a point.

Fleishman:

Yeah, that wouldn't be the case in South Africa for example anymore, it would have been the case in the 19 in the early part of the century of the 20th century, but from about the 1970s, 1980s onwards, that wouldn't be the case anymore.

Cormack:

And there are theatre troupes in Egypt too. I mean, I mentioned El-Warsha already because theirs is the most prominent but who are really experimenting with non-European form.

Fleishman:

And by non-European forms, you mean?

Cormack:

What you might call traditional Egyptian, typical Arabic, sort of what one may also call folk, but that's a loaded word. (*computer audio glitch*)

Fleishman:

Yeah. I'm very interested in this epic thing that you that you raised. That the possibility that the connection to this is actually epic that somewhere along the line the storytelling forms and these kind of things are across the continent much more and that where they overlap or reach towards the tragic they begin to come up. But it's not the tragedy per se that's the thing.

Cormack:

I wonder if Hassan El-Gerety might be a good person to speak to.

Fleishman:

Okay, and he's based in Cairo?

Cormack:

Yeah.

Fleishman:

Okay great. Thank you very much for your time I really appreciate it.

Cormack:

Thanks, no worries.