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| Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898-1987 |
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| Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898-1987) was an Egyptian playwright, short story writer, and novelist generally credited with giving birth to the theatre in Egypt. His fiction, in the form of several novels and short stories, is also widely canonized. Roger Allen called al-Hakim ‘one of the most significant figures in twentieth-century Arabic literature’ (Hutchins 9). Al-Hakim was also particularly concerned with developing an Egyptian National Theatre unencumbered, though inspired, by European models. His various writings engage with themes of culture, love, rationality, the European literary canon, government corruption, experimentation of form and language, nationalism, vernacularism, colonialism, and gender. |
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Al-Hakim received a law degree from Cairo University but was also drawn to creative writing while a student there. The first two plays he wrote, *al-Arees* (‘*The Bridegroom*’ (1924)) and *Khatim Sulayman* (‘*The Ring of Solomon*’ (1924)), were published without his last name attached to them in order to avoid having his family name be associated with the theatre.  Following his studies in Cairo, his father sent al-Hakim to Paris in 1925 in order for him to further advance his legal studies, with the goal of obtaining a doctorate at the Sorbonne. Instead of primarily studying law, however, al-Hakim immersed himself into the Parisian theatre scene, befriending and writing with several important playwrights, and attending scores of productions. He was particularly drawn to experimental performances and troupes and, on a later visit to Paris in 1959, with The Theatre of the Absurd. This exposure would inspire many of al-Hakim’s works and his overall approach to writing, though his intent was also to create a distinctly Egyptian literary style. In 1928, after realizing what his son had been doing in Paris, and before he was able to complete his doctorate, his father asked al-Hakim to return to Egypt and work as a lawyer. Al-Hakim began his work in Alexandria, but was promoted to Deputy Public Prosecutor in Tanta, and then in the more rural towns of Desouk and Damanhur. After 1934, al-Hakim left the practice of law for a career as a writer.  The experiences al-Hakim had while a prosecutor inspired his novel *Tawmiyat na’ib fil aryaf* (‘*Diary of a Country Prosecutor*’ (aka ‘*Maze of Justice*,’ 1937). This early and important work highlights many significant thematic elements found throughout al-Hakim’s writing. The novel follows a young lawyer in the countryside in Egypt who witnesses, experiences, and ultimately participates in the failure of the country’s justice system. The lawyers, judges and other government officials who work in the countryside are aloof, corrupt, absurd and inefficient at dealing with the rural population they are charged with serving. Al-Hakim critiques the situation in a humorously satirical yet darkly biting manner. His prose is modernist in that it never explains things but rather just interleaves the pages with dialogue and critical descriptions. Part of the problems he showcases in his novel is the complete inability of people to communicate with each other. Al-Hakim does this by employing a diversity of voices, from the legal language of the city judge, and the voices of the country lawyers trying to explain complex administrative details, to the vernacular dialogue of the countryside’s citizens who are often completely, and rightfully, unaware of anything the government officials are saying or doing.  The divide between rulers and those they rule, class difference, and the larger crisis of humanity in general of bring unable to connect with each other or with themselves would be a major theme throughout al-Hakim’s works. His early, and perhaps most well known play, *Ahl al-kahf* (‘*The People of the Cave*’) (1933), also highlights al-Hakim’s concern with communication. This play, based on Surrah 18 of *The Quran*, which is itself based on the Christian legend of the *Seven Sleepers of Ephesus*, also helped usher in the age of modern drama in Egypt.  Theatre in Egypt was in its beginning stages in the 1920s when al-Hakim began to integrate himself into the scene. Although several important dramatists, such as Ibraham Ramzi, Mohammed Taymur, Antun Yazbak and poet-turned-dramatist Ahmad Sharqi had been and were writing and presenting their work in Egypt since the 1850s, it wasn’t until the 1930s that serious and literary dramas began to be more widely accepted. Before this time, drama and the stage were largely venues for light fare. Being associated with the theatre was generally looked down upon as either salacious or puerile. The Egyptian government played an important role in a more widespread acceptance of the theatrical arts in the country by offering scholarships and grants to students, playwrights, and directors, and by opening a school of dramatic arts in 1930, headed by actor, teacher and director Zaki Tulaymat. *The People of the Cave* brought to Egypt a philosophically serious theme, garnered widespread critical acclaim by important literary figures such as Taha Hussein, and helped continue to open the doors to a more intellectual and artistically complex appreciation of the stage. It was the first play performed by the newly formed National Theatre Troupe in 1935.  *The People of the Cave* features three men: two courtiers (Mishilinya and Marnush) and a shepherd (Yamlikha), and the shepherd’s dog. The men hide in a cave to escape persecution for being Christians during the late Roman Empire. They fall asleep for three hundred years and awake to find that Christianity has become the dominant religion. One of the courtiers (Mishilinya) falls in love with his ex-lover’s relative (Prisca), a princess. The men, however, decide that they can’t understand anything that’s going on in this new contemporary world and retreat back to their cave to go back to sleep. The major themes of the play are time, love and communication. Al-Hakim highlights the inability of people to understand one another across time, even – or perhaps especially – through religion.  Al-Hakim’s play *Shahrazad* (1944) is also considered one of his canonical works. Al-Hakim drew upon motifs from *The 1001 Nights* often in his works, including his other plays *Ali Baba* (1926), *Sulayman al-hakim* (‘The *Wisdom of Solomon*’)(1943) and *Shams al-Nahar* (1965). In *Shahrazad*, however, al-Hakim dispenses with either directly romanticizing or critiquing the role of the *Nights* in world literature and its relationship to Egyptian culture. Instead, the play relies on sparse language and focuses on philosophical ideas. The play is set after the final stories of the *Nights* have concluded. Traditional renderings of the end of the *Nights* suggest that Shahrazad, through her nightly storytelling, has finally persuaded her husband, Shahryar, to give up his mistrust of all women. They fall in love and he becomes a beneficent ruler.  Al-Hakim’s post-*Nights* landscape features characters still searching for meaning and knowledge in the world, however. Shahryar has turned toward the intellect, rather than the body or love, and is seeking knowledge elsewhere in the world. He is, however, still tied to Shahrazad and his love for her, and this causes conflicts throughout the play between the quest for knowledge of the mind and the sensual desires of the body. Shahryar’s minister, Qamar, is also in love with Shahrazad and desperately, and unsuccessfully, courts her throughout the play. A slave also pursues Shahrazad but because his intentions are clear, and are sensual only, Shahrazad allows him to sleep with her. The play thus illustrates a web of humanity struggling in its intellectual and cultural pursuits, yet one that also, in its ultimate desires, is trying, essentially, to commune with one another.  Al-Hakim would continue his exploration of communication throughout his career, which also spanned some of Egypt’s most politically volatile time. His writing was also often a response to the changing nature of twentieth-century Egypt. His play *Praxa au mulkilat al-hukm* (‘*Praxa: or How to Govern*’), for example, was written in 1939, but al-Hakim added to it over time as Egypt changed. In its original form it was a critique of the current king of Egypt, Farouk I, and the widespread notion of the king’s weaknesses at the hands of the Egyptian military, and his lavish lifestyle. The main character of the play, Praxa, is a strong-willed woman who integrates women into the government for the first time, becoming the leader herself. She tries to liberalize the country, however, but fails at running it. A military officer seduces her and then takes over her position and puts her in prison. After the 1952 revolution in Egypt, al-Hakim added a chapter to *Praxa* about how the officer then became a dictator who purges the country of intellectuals and artists.  Al-Hakim’s treatment of women in his plays has had some notably critical responses but contemporary feminist scholarship is reevaluating these charges in more complex ways. *Praxa* is an example of such a play, one with a weak female character who is unable to govern or take charge in any effective manner. His early play *al-Mar’a al-Jadida* (‘*The New Woman*’) (1923) has also often been pointed to as an example of al-Hakim’s problematic rendering of women in his work. Layla, the daughter of the main character of the play, is portrayed as a cheating, money-obsessed female figure that uses her modern ‘liberated’ status in the play in a negative fashion, even becoming the lover of one of her father’s friends. Later plays, such as *al-Ayda al-na’ima* (‘*Soft Hands*’ (1954)), portrayed more complex female characters. In this work the men are depicted as acting foolishly and with selfish interests while their female counterparts are, for the most part, figures of stability and morality. In *Masir sorsar* (‘*The Fate of a Cockroach*’ (1966)) the female characters are also portrayed as being not only the equals of their male counterparts, but in many instance their superiors as well.  Although he received widespread critical acclaim and helped open the doors to the development of the Egyptian theatre in earnest, Tawfiq al-Hakim never received popular acclaim, something he often lamented openly in his writing. This lack, he suspected, was due to the sparse, experimental and philosophical nature of most of his theatrical works. Al-Hakim sought to incorporate more popularly appealing elements in many of his later plays, and the struggle between entertainment and the intellect was always present throughout his works. His play *al-Safqah* (‘*The Deal*’ (1956)) addressed this problem directly. Al-Hakim even wrote an addendum to it that outlined his concerns in balancing art and the popular theatre. The play features a more straightforward plot than many of his other works. A group of peasants who had banded together to buy some local land mistake a group of wealthy people, stranded there in an accident, for rivals in the land bid. The peasants give the wealthy people money to try to stop them from moving forward in the purchase. Mistaken identities, class issues, humor, and satire are incorporated into the text, and it was more popularly received than al-Hakim’s other, more experimental and complex works.  Tawfiq al-Hakim wrote about 70 plays, scores of short stories, and several well-received novels. He is considered one of the most important writers to come out of Egypt and one of the most significant Arabic writers of all time. In addition to his literary works, al-Hakim held several related government positions, including working for the Ministry of Education, as a journalist and weekly dramatist for *The Daily News*, and as the National Library Director General. Other well-known plays of his include his retelling of *el-Malik udib* (‘*King Oedipus*’ (1949)), his critique of poor government in *al-Ayda al-na’ima* (‘*Soft Hands*’ (1954)’ and *al-Sultan al-ha’ir* (‘*The Sultan’s Dilemma*’ (1960)), and his absurdist-inspired *Ya tali al-shajarah* (‘*The Tree Climber*’ (1962)). Representative collections of his short stories include *Ahd al-shaytan* (‘*Pact with Satan*’ (1938)), *Arni Allah* (‘*Show me God*’ (1953)), and *Lailat al-zifaf* (‘*Wedding Night*’(1966)). His other novels and semi-nonfictional writings such as the autobiographical *Sijil al-a’mar* (‘*Prison of Life*’ (1964)) and *Usfur min al-sharq* (‘*A Sparrow from the East*’ (1938)) experimented with the fluidity of nonfiction and fiction and continue to be some of his more lauded literary works. A collection of his translated essays was recently published as *The Revolt of the* Young (2014). Al-Hakim was married and had a son and a daughter. His wife died in 1977, his son in 1978 in a car accident. He died on July 26, 1987 and is survived by his daughter.  List of Works  *The Essential Tawfiq al-Hakim* (2008), edited by Denys Johnson-Davies, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.  *Plays, Prefaces and Postscripts of Tawfiq al-Hakim* (1981-3), translated by W.M. Hutchins, 2 vols., Washington DC, Three Continents Press.  *Diary of a Country Prosecutor* (2007), translated by Abba Eban, London, Saqi Books.  *Fate of a Cockroach and other Plays* (1973), translated by Denys Johnson-Davies, London, Cox & Wyman Ltd.  *The Tree Climber* (1966), translated by Denys Johnson-Davies, Oxford, Oxford University Press. |
| Further reading:  (Hutchins)  (Long)  (Starkey) |