Six Egyptian Hamlets: A Comparative Survey in Light of the Polysystem Theory

Submitted by

Sara Mohamed Enani

An Associate Professor of English, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University

Those who advocate normative approaches… [disregard] certain socio-cultural aspects which play an important role in the translation process. They… ignore the conditions under which [versions] are produced *so that they may function in the receiving culture.* In reality, however, the conditions… differ from period to period, and from language culture to language culture. (4) (my emphasis)

Abstract:

Young, independent theatre-makers have attempted to adapt classical texts to a more contemporary context. This study emphasizes their endeavors through a comparative study of six Egyptian performances of *Hamlet*. It is concluded that this adaptation of texts is currently a dominant cultural trend which, in turn, remarks the strong tradition already in existence.

Key words: Cultural modification, performances of Hamlet, Polysystem, Secondary mode, the Egyptian theatre.

Introduction

My title is derived from Romy Heylen's seminal work, *Translation, Poetics, and the Stage: Six French Hamlets.* In this work, Heylen theorizes that prescriptive and normative theories on translation are not necessarily the only relevant ones when it comes to evaluating a work of art, since such theories ignore the cultural and sociological context within which a translation is produced. Although he was speaking of translation, Heylen's words are strikingly applicable to the adaptation of well-known Western texts for the Arab stage.

Other scholars have written on translating Shakespeare and produced most illuminating results; this study, therefore, is not a study of translation except in the sense of 'translating' text into performance. What I seek to focus on is what predominantly young, independent theatre-makers have sought to make of *Hamlet* in order to bring it to an audience of their peers in a manner they consider fresh and contemporary, and of course relevant. To this end, I conduct a comparative study of six Egyptian performances of *Hamlet*, three of them student productions and three performed by independent theatrical troupes.

To start, I invite the reader to read the following passage by Heylen, replacing every variant of "translation" with "adaptation":

> Jean-Francois Ducis translated Shakespeare's *Hamlet* into alexandrines and the play subsequently became the [second] most frequently produced eighteenth-century drama at the Comedie Francaise… Marcel Schwob and Eugene Morand, 130 years later, translated the play into an artificially created seventeenth-century French prose, which was hailed by contemporary critics as daring and innovative, and performed by Sarah Bernhardt to packed houses in 1899. Normative theorists would simply regard such translations as horrible mistakes… according to their own time-bound rules. … Paying attention to historical and cultural constraints… makes us more aware of the reasons behind a translator's decisions. A historically descriptive… model can account for such "non-equivalent" efforts…

It is striking how Heylen's theory applies to performance. Egypt's independent theatre, particularly that produced after the introduction of the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theater, is still very much in love with Western texts, and although there

has been some effort to encourage playwriting and a great many successful efforts post-2005 or so, youth, university, experimental and independent theatre is still less apt to produce new texts than to tailor a Western text (in translation or otherwise) to the requirements of the director, usually an Artaud-style auteur figure (of varying degrees of talent). The reasons for this are manifold: ready-made credibility, especially in the case of Shakespeare and other major playwrights, an easier time of it with the censor, the dearth of any real schooling or support for writers in general, and so forth. Whether we as academics approve or disapprove of this trend, the phenomenon of 'adapting' Western theatrical texts for the Egyptian stage, despite them being theatrical texts in the first place and thus by definition needing no adaptation, is firmly entrenched in our current theatrical scene and shows no signs of waning. And perhaps as academics, we are more inclined to disapprove than theatre-makers who cheerfully adapt classical texts to serve their own needs and the needs of their audiences, who likewise are not complaining. Perhaps Heylen's model of the polysystem can be borrowed from translation studies to help explain the phenomenon of adaptation and situate it within both the Egyptian theatre and the place of Western theatrical texts in our Egyptian canon today.

Heylen first defines "primary" vs. "secondary" cultural activity: "Primary" activity... represents the principle of innovation," he says, whereas "Secondary" activity, on the

other hand, is… a derivative and conservative activity." (7) In other words, 'primary' activity is innovative while 'secondary' activity represents tradition. Heylen has translation in mind when he says, "…translations are likely to become one of the ways of elaborating new models and will [be]… innovative in the receiving culture." (7) Even-Zohar's "three major historical moments in which translated literature may acquire a primary position"(7), i.e. in which translation is the source for innovation, are then defined:

> **(1) …when a literature is "young," for instance, or in**
>
> **the process of being established;**
>
> **(2) when a literature is either "peripheral" or "weak"**
>
> **or both;**
>
> **(3) when there are turning points, crises, or "literary**
>
> **vacuums" in a literature. (Heylen 7-8)**

What this means is that in the above cases – when the target-language literature is weak – the translation is likely to adhere most closely (i.e. be 'faithful') to the original, to offer "a reproduction of the dominant textual relations of the original" (Even-Zohar in Heylen 9) – in other words, to take the form of the original and introduce it into the target language, as Maroun Naqqash did at the turn of the century by translating Moliere's plays into Arabic when the form of the classical play was not native to the

Arab world. On the other hand, according to the polysystem theory, if the native literature in the target language is strong, well-established, and culturally dominant, translators will feel more free to adapt and change the source text into something closer to what the target-language audience is accustomed to (such as the French translations of *Hamlet* mentioned in the quotation above). This appears to be especially the case with colonizer cultures. I am thinking here of Edward Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat,* apparently loose enough to earn the author the dubious title of "Fitz-Omar" (Kapoor 1). In defense of his "transmogrified" version, Fitzgerald is quoted as saying "At all costs, a thing must live… Better a live sparrow than a stuffed eagle."

Accurate translations are by no means 'stuffed eagles', but it is performance, not translation, which this study examines: therefore, the polysystem theory will be applied to the concept of changing a foreign classic to suit one's own culture. How have our six Egyptian *Hamlets* dealt with the problem of cultural (not to say historical) context? Do they fit the model of 'primary' (avant-garde) or 'secondary' (traditional) activity? If we apply the polysystem model to performance, according to Evan-Zohar the performance should be most faithful to the original text if the receiving culture is weak, and least faithful to the original text if the receiving culture is strong, that is to say, the performance will differ radically from the text when the director/dramaturg has enough

confidence in their culture's theatrical heritage and their own knowledge of the needs of their audience to enact significant modifications on the text.

In addition, since *by definition* the polysystem model makes the socio-cultural-historical setting a deciding factor in forming the end product, another system must be taken into account – namely, the system of *codes* that consciously or unconsciously govern every facet of a performance. These are most succinctly set out by Keir Elam in *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (66-76) and, while Elam goes into great detail about each of them, these are broadly defined as

- Theatrical codes

- Dramatic codes

- Cultural codes

The term 'codes' indicates *semiotic* codes – systems of creating meaning and governing performance that are accepted by audience and creators alike in a given society. *Theatrical codes* have to do with what is expected within the experience of going to a performance (for example, audiences expect that they will not be physically injured during a performance); *dramatic codes* have to do with the construction of the drama (it is expected to have characters who relate to each other in a certain way); and *cultural codes* are dictated by the conventions and mores of a given society at a given historical

point (for example, no nudity on stage in contemporary Egypt). These unspoken codes, shared by creators and spectators, are what enable us to come to the theatrical experience with a shared background.

There are thus two theoretical frameworks to this examination of the versions of *Hamlet* created by student, amateur, experimental and independent theatre makers: the polysystem and the prevailing theatrical/dramatic/cultural codes. Armed with these tools, one may go about answering the question, "What have young independent and university theatre-makers sought to make of *Hamlet* in order to bring it to an audience of their peers in a manner they consider fresh, contemporary, and relevant to their audiences?"

A primary change that is immediately obvious is that all the six *Hamlets* under examination cut the text to a greater or lesser degree. *Hamlet* uncut would normally run for over three hours: of the six productions, the longest is an hour and a half, and the shortest is thirty minutes (appropriately titled *Half Hour Hamlet).* To put this in perspective, one must examine these performances in their cultural context (i.e. the theatrical codes, or what audiences are accustomed to expecting). In today's Egyptian theatre, a great many Western texts performed in translation are cut to suit (what is assumed to be) a contemporary audience's shorter attention span. However, the cutting is definitely not as drastic as with the *Hamlets* under examination. This is characteristic:

Shakespearean plays produced by youth, university, experimental or independent troupes are often modified. The trend is not the same when Shakespeare is produced by the National Theatre or other big-budget (usually governmental) theatres. The 2002 *King Lear* that premiered at the National and the version now being performed to packed houses starring al-Fakharani is practically uncut, while the National's *Macbeth* was similarly performed in its entirety. Based on these six examples and numerous others in my experience, I believe it is safe to say that making cuts in the text is characteristic of youth, university, experimental and independent theatre.

Ain Shams University's College for Girls' student production, *Hey, Hamlet!* is the longest of the adaptations under study. Clocking in at 79 minutes, it nevertheless manages to take as little as possible from the Shakespearean text, using paraphrase, dance and farcical interaction to give expression to the events. It is a parody, with the all-female cast wearing colourful sequined costumes and wigs, and party decorations hanging on the walls of the brightly lit white-painted stage. Hamlet meets his father's ghost with a children's song to which they do a dance, and in the same vein, almost anything that can be mimed or danced is, plus many gratuitous songs and dances in the middle. The opening scenes with Bernardo, Francesco et al. are jettisoned entirely, and a few words are said to introduce the wedding. The bare bones of Hamlet's and Horatio's conversation about the ghost are kept in some five lines and a three-minute

condensation of the meeting between Hamlet, Gertrude and Claudius. There is one talk between Hamlet and Gertrude, and a few of Claudius' lines are kept, but by and large the substance of the play is expressed through mime, song and dance – for example, the play-within-a-play scene is introduced as "The actors have arrived" followed by a long dance. Ophelia, in an interesting twist, is played by two girls, wearing costumes that mirror each other (polka-dots on a white background vs. polka-dots on a black background), a metaphor, it would seem, for her being torn or divided, or for her private secrets being different from her public demeanor. The eventual denouement is also played for laughs, with Hamlet dragging Laertes around by one leg while he hops on the other, then a chorus yelling out "Vengeance, Hamlet!" and concluding with a song about how the players hope the audience enjoyed the show.

Parody is, of course, a legitimate form of adaptation. The makers of this show appear to have felt that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was unpalatable as-is, and therefore used a number of techniques: (a)making it into a parody, (b)drastically cutting the text, (c) paraphrasing and writing in conversational bridges to make up for the cuts, (d)setting it in a timeless clown/circus show, and (e)punctuating the show with almost-continual songs and dances including such iconic pieces as The Ketchup Song. These are all, according to the polysystem, cultural modifications enacted to modify the original text and make it palatable to a projected audience. In addition, a cultural code introduces

itself, cross-gender casting in the form of the all-female cast, as this is a College for Girls production; there is also a cultural-theatrical code, namely the cast wearing clown wigs to conceal their hair, as the actresses are all veiled. Similarly, the actresses double as singers and break the theatrical illusion routinely throughout the performance. These are cultural codes that are widely accepted in Egyptian theatre, so we cannot say that the mode, in Heylen's words, is primary: while there have been radical changes in the text and a reversal of its thrust through the parody form and a change from tragedy to comedy, this has been done before in the context of youth and experimental theatre, a fixture in Egypt since the 1990s, and therefore the changes are radical, but not innovative.

I Am Hamlet is the second longest show, at 78 minutes. It starts out with a cacophony of radio broadcasts and features video of contemporary Cairo, with scenes from the Metro, then shows the actor playing Hamlet and the entire cast standing with sound-effects and lighting to indicate that they are riding in a subway carriage. This show shares with the previous one the doubling of roles and the evident theatricality where actors fluidly switch from their role to their regular actor-self or a member of the chorus: it is much more somber in tone, though. The director's blurb is "Hamlet and I are partners, in distress, in melancholy, in the search for the truth, in hesitation, in the acquisition for [sic] justice, and maybe in the same depressing destiny. Hamlet, I am

also Hamlet. Hamlet, I am Hamlet." (Afifi 1) This is indicative of the thrust of the show, namely an attempt to bring the modern young man's suffering into focus through pointing up similarities to Hamlet's predicament. This is shown in a number of theatrical devices, most prominent among which is alternating contemporary scenes of the Metro with 'classical' scenes from the play. Costume is used to further the point of the play: Claudius and Gertrude are dressed in theatrical costume – khaki and a black-and-red gown respectively – while Hamlet remains in his modern clothing throughout, and moves fluidly from the palace setting to the Metro. This performance uses several devices to merge contemporary with historical setting. In addition to the video and the device of the Metro, Shakespeare's troupe of actors are replaced with a pop duo, and many lines are changed to contemporary references for comic effect. Hamlet's line "Get thee to a nunnery" becomes a confrontation with Ophelia where he says, "I can't be with a girl who has 500 male friends on Facebook!" The line where Polonius shows Gertrude and Claudius Hamlet's letter to Ophelia is replaced with Polonius showing them Ophelia's phone with a text from Hamlet and Gertrude checking to make sure it's her son's number. "Yes, here it is… it ends in 742…" Polonius tells her. The contemporary lines have a dual function: for comic relief, and to indicate a contemporary relevance to Hamlet's dilemma.

The text is also cut, although far less drastically than the previous play. Although they are almost the same length, *Hey, Hamlet* wastes an inordinate amount of time on songs and dances, while *I am Hamlet* sticks to the text and only introduces one song, to replace the play-within-a-play. Similarly to the previous adaptation, it also dispenses with Act I Scene I and starts directly with the scene between Claudius and Laertes asking to be allowed to go abroad to study. The major scenes are all there, with cuts for brevity. The techniques used to adapt and change this *Hamlet* are mainly: (a)combining contemporary with historical setting, (b)cutting the text, (c)replacing some of Shakespeare's text with contemporary lines, (d)underscoring theatricality by having actors double as their characters and – for instance – passengers in the Metro, and (e)using multimedia such as audio and video recordings, including playing Claudius' initial speech on speakers like a radio broadcast. All these devices are, according to the polysystem theory, differences introduced to modify the text from script to performance in a manner more suited to the receiving culture. The question remains whether this is a primary (innovative) or secondary (traditional) mode. Deliberate anachronisms are a feature of youth/student/independent/experimental theatre and have been seen on the Egyptian stage before, and so has actor doubling and multimedia. The changes are thus not a new element in Egyptian theatre and therefore we must conclude that the mode here is secondary.

Clocking in at just under an hour – 56 minutes – is *Hamlet in the House.* This version converts much of Shakespeare's text to Egyptian Arabic, and paraphrases many of the scenes. It is performed entirely in modern dress. The scenography creates a division in the stage: downstage left is a small table and a rocking-chair where Hamlet often returns to sit throughout the play, reading from a notebook and contemplating a skull. The Shakespearean action takes place center stage and stage right. This has the effect of creating a symbolic division between private and public, and possibly even past and present. Semiotically, the rocking-chair is often used to denote 'recollection in tranquility,' to use Wordsworth's phrase, and there is no reason the impecunious Upper Egyptian theatre troupe would have chosen a rocking-chair, quite hard to source in the Egyptian market, if not to make use of its connotations. Frequently, Hamlet returns to his rocking-chair during the scenes without him, and delivers his monologues in it. This adaptation is quite faithful to Shakespeare's original despite the drastic cuts: it keeps Fortinbras, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and a great many of the original lines (paraphrased into Egyptian Arabic in prose). The bare bones of most of the scenes are kept, with the notable elimination of the entire segment of the play-within-a-play. Political intrigue is the main theme that the cuts seek to highlight. All the references to the people of Denmark are kept, and more significantly, this version is the only one that introduces Fortinbras in the final scene. He climbs to the top of the raised platform

center stage where Claudius' throne is located, conveying the conclusion – that Denmark, "rotten" from within, is about to be invaded from without.

A great many changes have been introduced into this version of *Hamlet,* even though the thrust of Shakespeare's play is recognizably there in the final version. These include: (a)clothing the actors in modern dress, (b)paraphrasing the text into the Egyptian vernacular, (c)using a symbolic division in the stage between private and public by means of the set, and (d)cutting the text drastically to make it fit into under an hour. Since the polysystem theory places cultural modification as a central facet of the version produced, this show fits into that framework; also, Elam's cultural codes come into play, as the actresses in the production are both veiled, Gertrude wearing a headband with a gem in it to imply a crown, but otherwise wearing modern dress – a beige minidress over black spandex. Similarly to the previous adaptations, performances in modern dress, cutting the text, deliberate anachronism, etc., are familiar to Egyptian theatregoers, so these innovations once more fall into a secondary mode, i.e. one that is (comparatively) less innovative and more conventional *by young experimental standards.* In other words, it conforms to the *theatrical and dramatic codes* an audience member would expect when attending a young/independent/experimental performance.

Mad Thoughts from Hamlet's Notebook, presented by the Cairo University Faculty of Medicine Theatre Group at the 2014 University Theatre Festival, similarly conforms to the theatrical/dramatic codes of youth and experimental theatre. It jettisons all the early scenes and starts directly with the Ghost's appearance: this is indicative of what is done with the rest of the text. Over 53 minutes, the main scenes of the play are touched upon – Hamlet's soliloquy, the ghost scene, the confrontation with Gertrude, etc. – but many things are cut. Polonius' death happens offstage and is reported by Hamlet to save time; Ophelia's role is cut entirely. This is very definitely a "version," in Heylen's words, with a distinctly expressionistic feel. The stage is draped in black with focused spotlights creating minimal lighting, and two white pillars like Roman columns on either side of the stage: there are four mannequins, two on each side of the stage, dressed in rich royal garb, while the chorus is all draped in shapeless black garments. Hamlet is played by two actors, looking quite different: one is in Elizabethan royal garb and a wig, while the other is his more violent alter ego, wearing black and with his natural hair showing. Claudius and Gertrude wear golden crowns. Several devices are used to modify the text: Hamlet recites his soliloquy and the group of actors seated on the stage respond to him in unison, much like a Greek chorus; the doubling of Hamlet's character is a device only used in Shakespearean performances dubbed 'experimental'; and the show is punctuated by dances and group scenes, such as one where the group

forms a circle around both Hamlets and wraps white bands of fabric around them like a Maypole, as well as operatic recitatives sung by a singer standing on a high platform upstage left. These recitatives are completely outside Shakespeare's text and constitute a new addition, including an exhortation against suicide which concludes the play. There are also additions in the form of the chorus, as the populace, chanting for Laertes to be crowned king in what looks a lot like a political demonstration, and a lot of references to the "populace" added.

This play conforms to the theatrical and dramatic codes of modern Egyptian youth and experimental theatre. Some of these are (a)combining classical costume with expressionistic garb, (b)cutting the text and adding lines, (c)a non-realistic set with mannequins and vestigial columns on stage, and (d)the use of song and dance to express themes and create emotional impact. It must therefore be concluded that since these innovations all fall into what would be expected of youth, student, independent and experimental theatre, this version occupies a secondary mode.

Goodbye, Hamlet jettisons the Shakespearean text entirely. It features a metatheatrical performance about a theatre troupe (in, of course, modern dress) trying to agree on how to cast the roles in their own production of *Hamlet.* The play starts with the gravedigger scene, then quickly departs from Shakespeare's text as we are introduced to the actors: a drunkard, a married couple, a pair of lovers, etc. There is then an entire metatheatrical

play of original dialogue. It may be punctuated by occasional attempts at playing the gravedigger scene, but it is entirely a new play. It features the actors' fights with the director and emphatic proclamations that they just want to "get paid and do the job and go home," and sordid revelations about their personal lives, including the revelation that the young girl in the company has been working as a courtesan to support her ill father. Finally, the actor finally chosen to play Hamlet, by now thoroughly disillusioned with it all, gives up and walks out through the auditorium, ending the play.

This play uses strategies that differ in some ways from the previous ones: (a) mainly using *Hamlet* as a metaphor and intertextual reference, making use of the intertextual connotations of Shakespeare's play (existential despair, crisis of faith, nihilism) to add a metaphorical dimension to the failures and disillusionments of the metatheatrical actors/characters; (b)it only uses snippets of *Hamlet* to intertextually enrich an entirely new play; (c)it uses the actors' everyday clothing to fit the metatheatrical theme. Any audience member going to the theatre hoping to see Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in some form would be disappointed or surprised; since it does not conform to dramatic codes (what ways in which it breaks theatrical codes are traditional by now, such as metatheatre and entering and exiting through the auditorium) one might tentatively assign it a primary mode.

Half-Hour Hamlet uses two main techniques: cutting the text, and playing it with six different Hamlets, each speaking lines from Shakespeare's text that show the character of Hamlet in a different way as they go through the play: one Hamlet is assertive, one is sensitive, one is cowardly, and so on. Outside of this character device, the text is presented in order, although of course with drastic cuts to fit into the 30-minute framework. The set is expressionistic, with a six-foot-tall face dominating the set, and vaguely historical costumes. The six Hamlets periodically perform a choreographed movement where they form a line and a V-shape before resuming the play with whichever Hamlet its turn is.

The techniques in this version are as follows: (a)not only cutting the text but selecting mainly Hamlet's speeches in order to make a point about character; (b)it divides up the role of Hamlet among six actors; (c)it combines quasi-historical costume with an artistic, expressionistic set. While the combination of these is not as common as the combinations seen in some other versions, the ways in which it breaks the theatrical codes have been seen before. The breaking of dramatic codes is almost unseen hitherto, so it may be said that theatrically it occupies a secondary mode and dramatically it occupies a primary mode.

The commonalities between these six performances lie in the way they modify the Shakespearean text into something the makers consider palatable to their audience,

keeping in mind that this is by no means (nor could it possibly be) an exhaustive overview:

All the plays are one-act versions, without intermission. They are also close to each other in duration, ranging from 30 minutes to 90 minutes, and averaging about one hour.

It would appear that all the adaptations (that actually keep some of Shakespeare's text) find introductory scenes unnecessary, preferring to start directly with the first scene between Hamlet, Claudius and Gertrude, and in one case, skipping straight to the Ghost scene.

At least four of the versions add Egyptian vernacular lines or even entire scenes to the performance, either as a form of paraphrase or as original additions.

All the plays drastically cut the text. They tend to cut most of the long speeches to their bare bones and paraphrase scenes to a greater or lesser degree to advance the plot. The first scene where Claudius, Hamlet, Gertrude and Laertes all come together is kept in all but one of the productions, cut to a greater or lesser extent: *I am Hamlet* and *Hamlet in the House* both keep a little more of it, including "But, you must know, your father lost a father;/That father lost, lost his…" In the next scene, Hamlet's line "Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd/His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!" is generally kept, cut out from the long speech that follows, along with a few more lines. References to

Fortinbras and the political side of things are downplayed, not to say dismissed, in *Hey, Hamlet!* and *Goodbye, Hamlet,* and to a lesser degree in *I am Hamlet.*

The secondary characters are all cut, and in the case of Horatio and Laertes, reduced to only the lines that advance the plot. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are only kept in *I am Hamlet* and *Hamlet in the House,* referencing false friendship in the former and political intrigue in the latter, and their scenes are paraphrased. In short, the adaptations cut what they deem superfluous and keep the segments consistent with the themes in *Hamlet* that the authors of each version seek to focus on.

Three of the plays, *Hey, Hamlet, I am Hamlet,* and *Mad Thoughts From Hamlet's Notebook,* use live music and/or singing on stage. (This is quite in keeping with the original Elizabethan tradition of performing Shakespeare.) Meanwhile, *I am Hamlet* also uses multimedia in the form of the video of Cairo and the sound-effects of the Cairo Metro in order to cement the contemporary relevance of this adaptation.

All the plays underscore the theatrical element by means of fluid setting, actors moving about on stage between the different locations freely, and doubling roles.

All the versions have minimal scenery, using only props and sometimes raised elevations on stage.

All but one of the versions make use of modern dress and/or timeless, expressionistic costume, sometimes both together, and occasionally mix it with historical costume, with the result that differing time periods are visually juxtaposed on stage.

Intertextuality is not directly employed, but it is implied in the merging of contemporary dress, songs and dances and framing devices that implicitly contrast the text of *Hamlet* (assuming audience competence in the form of knowing the plot of *Hamlet*) with the contemporary era.

In every version, Elam's theory of *audience competence* comes into play. Each adaptation is built on the assumption that the audience has some familiarity with *Hamlet,* at least the bare bones of the plot. This is especially true for *Goodbye, Hamlet,* which aside from the gravedigger scene has no real relation to Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* Why would a play that has little or nothing to do with *Hamlet* reference the play at all? Clearly for something other than using a classical text as credibility. As the themes of *Goodbye, Hamlet* gradually come into focus – an incompetent director, an actor unsure of which part to play, an actress who has sold her virtue – the intention *must* be to draw a parallel with the themes of *Hamlet* including corrupt authority, indecision and loyalty for sale to the highest bidder. The choice of the gravedigger scene symbolizes the nadir, the nihilistic awareness that the cesspit of existence only ends in death.

All the above falls closely in line with the prominent characteristics of postmodernism: eclecticism, intertextuality and a tendency to parody and even self-parody.

Conclusion

Upon examination of these six experimental/university/independent/youth plays, a pattern may be identified. Heylen's classification of "primary mode", i.e. innovative mode, spoke of a cultural context in which the source text (such as a play) had no direct equivalent in the target culture (for example, Egypt in the 1900s), and therefore, *adhering to the source text as closely as possible* constituted an *innovation,* or a *primary* mode in Evan-Zohar's words. However, in the above performances, we have seen *changes,* or *innovations,* that are a *secondary* mode: in other words, modifying the text to fit a cultural context according to the polysystem theory. According to Heylen's polysystem, a culture only feels confident enough to modify a source text when it is strong, flourishing, or dominant. The fact that young experimental Egyptian theatre-makers feel confident enough to add, subtract, set to music, anachronize, double-cast, cross-gender cast, and otherwise modify Shakespearean texts is therefore an indication of a *strong* culture – or in this case, subculture. Youth/experimental theatre is a subcultural division of Egyptian theatre that has been gaining strength since the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre was launched in 1988. In 2010, Nehad

Selaiha wrote of a thirty-year-long theatrical tradition that was by then firmly established:

> …finally our young directors had realized that there were other ways of approaching Shakespeare than the traditional ones. More significantly, they had discovered that, far from being a rigid, priggish, old-fashioned and extremely verbose pontiff (as traditional productions and most drama classes made him out to be), he was lively, highly theatrical, full of tricks, and could be bawdy, naughty, skeptical or sacrilegious when it suited his purposes. At last they had *a Shakespeare they could love and play with* -- a Shakespeare who rebelliously flouted the classical rules to delight his audience, was not above cashing in on the popularity of any text, dramatic or otherwise, and using it as material for a new play, and even lifting whole lines out of it, *and who did not seem to regard dramatic texts as finished, self-sufficient creations, but, rather, as blueprints for myriad theatrical productions*. Indeed, the fact that Shakespeare had

worked as a writer/actor in a commercial company and

was not one of the 'university wits' of his time (a fact

deemed embarrassing by most teachers and discreetly

pushed aside) endeared him all the more to young theatre

people in Egypt. (Selaiha 2010:1; my emphasis)

Selaiha goes on to list over twenty recent (at the time) Egyptian productions of Shakespeare, all of which had, much like the ones under examination here, made free with the Bard, either in terms of adumbration, adaptation or parody. All of this constitutes evidence of a strong and flourishing cultural trend of the type that Heylen mentions when he speaks of such versions as 18th- and 19th-century France, when the French adapted *Hamlet* in a manner that drastically modified Shakespeare's text to suit the tastes of its audience. If anything, such an overview of Shakespeare shows how far the Egyptian theatre – and especially alternative/student/youth/experimental theatre – has come since the Western tradition in Egyptian theatre was introduced via the first translations from French in the early 1900s. Back then, performance complete and uncut was an innovation in and of itself; a hundred years later, irreverent adaptations of Shakespeare are themselves the tradition, at least among the non-governmental, no-budget theatre companies for whom innovation and adaptation have become a matter of course.

Clearly, contemporary university and independent theatre-makers seem to find something of the stuffed eagle about an intact foreign text, particularly a Shakespearean one. Egyptian audiences will flock to a traditional performance, complete and uncut, of Shakespeare – the English-language *Hamlet* presented at the Biblioteca Alexandrina as part of the Globe Theatre's world tour was sold out and standing room only – and the complete *King Lear,* with superstar Yehya al-Fakharani in the title role, was such a success at the National Theatre that it has been performed on and off since 2002 as a commercial theatre show.

Thus, the conclusion that can be reached is that modification and adaptation of, and experimentation with, classical texts is currently a dominant cultural trend among youth, university, experimental and independent theatre-makers and such adapted texts and versions are in line with the strong tradition already in existence. Therefore, adaptation occupies a secondary mode in the strong alternative current, over thirty years strong. If this type of modification – character doubling, text paraphrasing, introducing new scenes, etc. – were to gain traction in the big-budget or mainstream governmental theatre, it would remain primary for a while, as these theatrical and dramatic codes are not the same in that segment of Egyptian theatre production. However, the question of whether the polysystem is a serviceable model for surveying text-to-performance modifications in Shakespearean texts has yielded the result that

radical textual changes are currently the norm for youth, university, independent and experimental theatre in Egypt, which seems a worthwhile conclusion.

Works Cited

Abdulrahman al-Shafei, Mohamed, director. *Half Hour Hamlet.* Graduation Project of the Second Acting and Directing Class at the Cairo Creativity Center. Cairo, 2014.

Afifi, Hani. *I Am Hamlet.* Cairo: Creativity Center, 2009. Available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTJ8ZsX12iY&list=PL851D58FBD677D5 8C&index=1

Ain Shams University College for Girls. *Hey, Hamlet!* 2012. Available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxH-pP3PzHA&feature=youtu.be

Al-Zahraa, Fatima. Director. *Mad Thoughts from Hamlet's Notebook.* Cairo University Faculty of Medicine Theatre Group, 2014 University Theatre Festival. Cairo 2014.

Elam, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. New Accents. London: Psychology Press, 2002.

Globe Theatre World Tour. *Hamlet.* Performed at the Biblioteca Alexandrina, January 12 2015.

Heylen, Romy. *Translation, Poetics and the Stage: Six French Hamlets.* Routledge

    Library Editions: Shakespeare in Performance. Oxon and New York:

    Routledge, 2014.

Ibrahim, Mostafa. Director. *Hamlet in the House.* Kharbasha Theatre Company: Assiut,

    March 2014. Available at

    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8lHhZ0OinQ&feature=youtu.be

Kapoor, Manan. "Why Edward FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam* is one of the

    most controversial translations ever." *Scroll.in,* June 29, 2019.

    https://scroll.in/article/927555/why-edward-fitzgeralds-rubaiyat-of-omar-

    khayyam-is-one-of-the-most-controversial-translations-ever

Metwaly, Ati. "All the world's a stage: Hamlet's game of contrasts captures Egyptian

    audience." *Al-Ahram Weekly,* 20 Jan 2015.

    http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsWorldCup/2018/120754.aspx

Rassem, Ahmad. Director. *Goodbye, Hamlet.* Art Appreciation Palace: Alexandria,

    January 2015.

Selaiha, Nehad. "Going Digital." *Al-Ahram Weekly Online,* 30 August-5 September

    2007. http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2007/860/cu2.htm Unavailable at

    time of writing: accessible at

https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:Nddq5Wdr2hQJ:week

ly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2007/860/cu2.htm+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=eg

_____ "Time for Dreams." *Al-Ahram Weekly Online,* 24-30 June 2010.

http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2010/1004/cu1.htm Unavailable at time of

writing: accessible   at

https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:oJbOn_xqWXgJ:week

ly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2010/1004/cu1.htm+&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=eg

Sélim, May. "Tracing Shakespeare." *Al-Ahram Weekly Online,* Saturday 30 April 2016.

Available at http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/205745.aspx

مستخلص الدراسة:

حاول صانعو المسرح الشباب المستقلين تكييف النصوص الكلاسيكية مع سياق أكثر معاصرة. تؤكد هذه الدراسة مساعيهم من خلال دراسة مقارنة لستة عروض مصرية لهاملت. وخلص إلى أن هذا التكيف للنصوص هو في الوقت الحالي اتجاه ثقافي مهيمن ، والذي بدوره يشير إلى التقاليد القوية الموجودة بالفعل.

كتب علماء آخرون حول ترجمة شكسبير وأنتجوا معظم النتائج المضيئة. وبالتالي ، فإن هذه الدراسة ليست دراسة ترجمة إلا بمعنى "ترجمة" النص إلى أداء. ولكن بصدد عمل مقارنات لاعمال ادبيه شبيهه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المسرح- الدراما- اعمال شكسبير الدراميه- رؤيه مصريه لاعمال غربيه- السياق الثقافى المصرى و الغربى