

NONSENSE AND MORALITY: INTERWAR EGYPT AND THE COMEDY OF NAJIB AL-RIHANI

By Carmen Gitre

On 27 March 1921, an audience gathered at the Egyptiana theater in the heart of Cairo's entertainment district on 'Imad al-Din Street. It was opening night for actor-manager Najib al-Rihani's (1892–1949) new comic operetta, *Riwayat Diqqat al-Mu'allim*, or *The Story of the 'Umda's Knock*.¹ In the 1920s, theater-goers included students, politicians, government employees, rural and urban elites, and educated professionals.² They were well acquainted with Rihani and his recurring character, Kishkish Bey, an honest provincial mayor who travels to the big city and is dazzled by its temptations and deceptions. Naive but no fool, Kishkish is cunning and always triumphs over the conniving foreigner or city-dweller who tries to manipulate him.

In the opening of this meandering three-act operetta, Kishkish plays the part of a physician who has eyes only for (and provides care only to) attractive young women. A chorus of men set the mood singing love songs to which a chorus of women cheekily respond. "Night, oh night," the men sigh, and the unmoved women flatly reply, "it's a black night." Failing to make the women swoon, the men muse among themselves, "we didn't count on her

Carmen Gitre is Assistant Professor of Middle East History at Virginia Tech University.

running away from us.” “What will we do with these good-for-nothings,” the women grumble.³

The scene abruptly shifts to Kishkish Bey and his patients. That day, Kishkish is swamped with miserably sick people pleading for his help. As a chorus, they cry out:

“Check our temperature! We’re going to die.”

He responds to a young woman, “Nonsense, Zakiyya, I will treat you with my eyes,” an idiom meaning he would treat her with the greatest care. He touts his expertise in Dr. Seuss-like rhyme, reassuring her. But when an elderly woman also seeks his assistance, he barely turns his head to advise her: “See another doctor.”

“Ahh, ahh,” the old woman moans.

“May you get a fever,” replies Kishkish, unmoved, who then diagnoses her with three or four illnesses. “Believe me,” he counsels, “it’s better for you to die.”

Several scene changes and patriotic songs later, the actors call on Egyptians of all religious persuasions to overcome differences and unite. “We vow,” the actors sing, “Muslims, Christians, and Jews will not separate.”⁴ And on this patriotic note, the operetta concludes.

In the early twentieth century, comic actor, manager, and playwright Najib al-Rihani delighted Egyptians by bringing street performance and colloquial theater to the proscenium stage.⁵ His theater illuminated issues in contemporary Egyptian society through humor and his recurring Everyman character, the *ibn al-balad* (authentic Egyptian) Kishkish Bey, always came out on top.⁶

Audiences adored Rihani and Kishkish Bey. Contemporary Egyptian nationalists and theater critics, however, had mixed responses. For them, if theater was not didactic, aphoristic, or morally uplifting, it was suspect. Playwright and critic Muhammed Taymur wrote that vaudeville and similar entertainments were “full of obscene jokes and shameful attitudes . . . such shameless plays are the most dangerous types for morals.”⁷ Worse was the prevalence of seemingly trivial, colloquial songs in those performances.⁸ If theater was a moral university, as many argued—one that connected a het-

erogenous population in the same way that mosques, churches, and schools did—then the stage was crucial to the moral and patriotic health of the newly independent nation.⁹ Cultural commentators critiqued Rihani's early work for pandering to the base instincts of men and its indulgence of lower-class tastes. This, to them, was not an edifying use of the stage. To the contrary, such performances celebrated undesirable behaviors to unknowable ends.

In some ways, the published critiques missed the point. Comedy allowed Rihani and others to mirror, mock, and challenge society in a way that no other medium could. Its improvisations and metaphors simultaneously hid and revealed contemporary realities in a benign fashion. A laughing body, authorities could reassure themselves, was quite removed from a socially disruptive one. Yet through humor, Rihani delivered potent messages about Egypt as it made the transition from British protectorate to independent nation. As migration from rural to urban areas accelerated, and as changing gender roles and questions of authenticity preoccupied Egyptians in the socio-political arena, Rihani delivered both entertainment and social critique. He mocked the arrogant, called for cross-sectarian unity, and celebrated the oppressed but noble Everyman, whom Kishkish represented. Indeed, Rihani celebrated the Everyman's inherent value, despite his failings and regardless of his religious affiliation, to the unified body of the Egyptian nation.

I argue here that Rihani's comedy contained more than the trivialities that critics disparaged. Rather, through humor, Rihani offered an alternative moral and ethical vision of the promise of the Egyptian nation. His was a call to patriotic unity by and for morally imperfect people, exemplified by Kishkish. While elites offered class-reinforcing critiques of the morality of entertainment and the appropriate use of leisure, an underlying fear was the power of humor to change and move people without their even realizing it. The ambivalence of humor made it at once unifying and potentially dangerous. Providing audiences ready to laugh with a new perspective on their society may not lead to social upheaval, but it could more fully illuminate the status quo, raise uncomfortable questions, and create space for new possibilities. These were undesirable outcomes for those who had power, status, and dignity to lose.

Critics who considered Rihani's work trivial, however, failed to dissuade loyal audiences from filling the theaters staging his plays. His admirers were

diverse, not just “everymen,” and the humor in Rihani’s shows provided them a shared experience and space for laughing together. What they took away from the performance was less clear. Comedy’s oblique perspective on Egyptian society might cast new light on the familiar. The effect on audiences was unpredictable.

Remembered today as one of the most important contributors to modern Egyptian comedy, Rihani was born in Cairo 1889 to an Assyrian-Iraqi father and a Coptic Christian mother. For over three decades, Rihani performed on stage and screen and took his troupe on multiple tours from the Levant to places as far away as Latin America. He attended a French school and had a comfortable life until his father, a horse trader and later an owner of a gypsum factory, died and left what he had to an orphaned niece. From the age of sixteen, Rihani worked to support his family while completing high school.¹⁰

Rihani’s primary love was theater. He spent his spare time attending performances and socializing in cafes with would-be actors.¹¹ Coffeeshops were a mainstay for Rihani. In those spaces, he made contacts with actors, found employment, and arranged deals with local theater owners to host runs of his plays until he earned enough to enter a long-term rental agreement for his own theater, the *Egyptiana*.¹²

Initially drawn to drama and tragedy, Rihani joined the troupe of Salama Hijazi, a renowned singer, and Jurj Abyad, a classically trained actor who tried to initiate a “serious theater” movement upon his return from France.¹³ Rihani did not last long, as Abyad thought him a terrible actor and audiences could not help but laugh when Rihani performed serious roles.¹⁴ Fired from the troupe, Rihani returned to his favorite coffeeshop.

By World War I, Rihani was writing popular comedic skits and performing in Cairo’s theaters and cabarets with a host of different collaborators.¹⁵ He worked as an actor and writer for the ‘Aziz ‘Id troupe until May 1916 when he started his own company. Rihani’s early work consisted chiefly of one-act shows and farcical sketches, but over time these expanded into more elaborate plays. As was common in comedic plays and revues at the time, his shows included lots of music, especially the short, strophic form called *taqtuqa*.

Rihani's performances drew heavily from French farce, especially in this early stage of his career. He adapted French plays into what he called "Franco-Arab revues"—short, improvised, comic skits that he first performed in the Abbaye des Roses cabaret in Cairo.¹⁶ The shows were performed in French and Arabic and were punctuated by vignettes featuring European female dancers. They attracted a mixed crowd that included village 'umdas (real versions of the fictional Kishkish) whose cotton crops were booming and British soldiers who were omnipresent in Cairo once the war broke out.¹⁷ In a late 1910s entry in his memoirs, Rihani describes the audience for his show at the Egyptiana: "even though there were 1,000 seats, all were sold out an hour before the show . . . elites and people of all nationalities" booked seats in the modest tented and sandy-floored theater.¹⁸

French theater was not Rihani's sole inspiration. He and his fellow writers describe how popular entertainments influenced their playwriting. Performers like Georges Dakhul, a Syrian comedian famous for his half-upturned mustache and multicolored outfits, translated elements of shadow play and *aragoz* (puppetry) to coffeehouse stages. Dakhul profoundly influenced Rihani.¹⁹ Badi' Khayri, a poet and schoolteacher who scripted many of Rihani's revues, wrote about spending time during his childhood listening to professional storytellers who recited epics, folkloric tales, and stories from the *Arabian Nights*. He also enjoyed watching a genre of short, farcical skit known as the *fasl mudhik* in coffeehouses in the Sayyidna al-Husayn district. There, he immersed himself not only in the stories and comic styles on stage but also in the dialects and colloquialisms of the customers who enjoyed the entertainments with him.²⁰

An indigenous tradition of professional colloquial theater performed on a proscenium stage had begun in the mid-nineteenth century with playwrights Ya'qub Sannu' and 'Uthman Jalal. Jalal's Egyptianized translations of plays by Moliere and others laid the groundwork for future colloquial Egyptian theater.²¹ The plays of Sannu' included stock characters that recurred in Rihani's generation of comic theater. Characters like religious shaykhs, the *ibn al-balad* or authentic Egyptian, and non-Egyptians with stereotyped accents like the Nubian servant, Greek-Egyptian, Syrian, Moroccan, and European tourist continued to appear in the early twentieth century when colloquial Egyptian theater became a popular medium of expression.²²

Professional colloquial theater exploded during World War I. Previously, traveling European theater companies presented a significant portion of the stage performances in Cairo and Alexandria. The war, however, made it impossible for European companies to travel to Egypt, creating a space for local operettas, revues, and vaudeville to flourish. The troupes of Najib al-Rihani and 'Ali al-Kassar, and the competition between them, drove the popularity of the colloquial comedic theater. Satirical plays were allowed to operate with only limited censorship by authorities. A contemporary playwright wrote that comedy worked to “alleviate the cloud of fear and worry that lingered in every heart and mind” during the war.²³

Until the end of World War I, Egypt had been part of the Ottoman Empire and simultaneously under British control. As World War I came to an end, Egyptian nationalists saw an opportunity to attain independence from both the failing Ottoman empire and the British occupying power. Patriotic fervor reached a peak in 1919 when delegates Sa'd Zaghul and others were exiled to Malta after being denied permission to attend peace talks and appeal for Egyptian independence. Street protests were the embodiment of a seemingly unified Egyptian populace demanding freedom from British colonial occupation.

But freedom meant different things to different people. After Britain granted Egypt unilateral independence, those politicized groups shifted away from political action toward demands for social change. The class, gender, and religious unity of the 1919 protests splintered as new constellations of people gathered to demand reforms that were most salient to them. Transport workers, women's rights activists, judges, students, and the many others who united in 1919 behind the common goal of ousting the British had different priorities as to what should follow. Thus, in the post-1919 period, nationalists found it more important than ever to emphasize national unity in the newly independent nation. Entertainments that emphasized “the primacy of Egyptian identity over sectarian identity” were central to framing and disseminating this message, and Rihani's plays reflected this shift.²⁴ In the 1920s, Rihani moved away from “revues” and toward “operettas” that combined farce with moral and patriotic messages.

In September 1917, Rihani took over the *Egyptiana* café and turned it into a theater. A contemporary newspaper described the space: “It had a dirt floor, canvas cloth ceiling, and disorderly rows of chairs made of the

cheapest raffia.”²⁵ By 1917, most professional theater companies in Cairo and Alexandria charged five piasters for general admission.²⁶ As was the trend at the time, ads for Rihani’s shows indicated that Tuesday afternoon performances were exclusively for women and Sundays were family days.²⁷ Four years later, the newspaper *al-Sayf* described an Egyptiana that had been renovated. “Readers should know that the theater has been rebuilt, elegant, and all that is in it is new, beautiful, and dazzling.”²⁸

Undoubtedly, the theater renovations were at least in part due to Rihani’s tremendous commercial success. A journalist for *Express* commented in 1919 that “we attempted to go to al-Rihani’s theater, but unfortunately we were not able to penetrate the tremendous crowd which was assembled in front of the theater door and extended to seemingly forever. We were told that entering tonight would be impossible and that we would have to come another day and attempt to beat the crowds.”²⁹ By 1920, as scholar Leila Abou-Seif describes, the Egyptiana was “at the height of its glory, crowded nightly with students, politicians, officials, and members of the upper classes who were coming to indulge in patriotism and enjoy [Sayyid] Darwish’s native music and Khayri’s trenchant songs.”³⁰

Darwish and Khayri’s songs transcended the walls of the theater. Aided by a burgeoning recording industry, contemporary critic Muhammad Taymur pointed out that “wealthy women sing his songs in their homes, as do children in streets and alleys.”³¹ The lyricist, Khayri, recalled in his memoirs how audiences would “exit the theater memorizing his songs, and the music would spread everywhere.”³² Success meant that Rihani’s competitors increased in number and moved their performances to theaters closer to the Egyptiana. ‘Ali al-Kassar moved into the neighboring Majestic Theater, playing the recurring blackface character Osman ‘Abd al-Basit, and Yusuf Wahbi performed the character Hinjil Bubu at the Casino de Paris on the very same street.³³ Both characters were in the same vein as Kishkish Bey.

While his shows were generally well attended, Rihani was surprised by the extent to which his success spread beyond the fashionable, middle-class ‘Imad al-Din Street. On a visit with his wife, actress Badī‘ Masabni, to the less prestigious Rawd al-Farag entertainment district in Cairo, Rihani learned there was a man claiming to be the real Kishkish who performed there nightly. This man was not the only impersonator. There were Kishkishes in the Egyptian countryside, in Cairene coffeehouses, and abroad in Syria,

Brazil, and Argentina. All of them claimed to be the “real” (*asil*) Kishkish and said Rihani was the copy.³⁴

Journals regularly posted ads for plays to encourage readers to attend performances around Cairo and Alexandria. In March 1921, the journal *al-Sayf* announced the opening of Rihani’s new play:

Every night, the Egyptian people see (can see) the play *Diqqat al-Mu’allim*, written by Mr. Najib al-Rihani and the writer/literateur Badi‘ Khayri and Husayn Shafiq the Egyptian. Readers of this newspaper know their work in literature, morals and humor. And there is nothing other than to say that it’s a good [*khayr*] play that I’ve seen in Egypt of its kind . . . the play has ten scenes, which is unprecedented in Arab performance. *Diqqat al-Mu’allim* is showing every evening starting today.³⁵

It was not an exceptional review, though it pointedly remarked on the authors’ previous engagement with morals and comedy in their work in order to assuage any concerns readers might have about the quality of the Rihani operetta. The big names associated with the show—and the fact it would be performed in the newly renovated Egyptiana theater—drew audiences every night for just over one month.³⁶

Those audiences would enjoy an opening scene of male and female choruses singing back and forth to each other, followed by a humorous exchange between the physician, Kishkish, and his female patients. After treating only the attractive ones, Kishkish decides it is time to head to Mamlakat al-Hiwar, an area known for its prostitutes. He sings about finding a beautiful woman and recommends the same to all the male members of the audience. In the midst of his walk, there is an abrupt interlude with a patriotic song that praises the Egyptian flag. He arrives in the neighborhood and enjoys flirting with a woman named Lucy who inserts French and English words into the conversation. They share a drink, and the scene moves again, this time to a department store having a sale.³⁷

A salesperson tries to lure people into the store through song in hopes that they will buy all the commodities on sale. The wares are a mishmash of what one might find at a Cicurel or Omar Effendi department store, the

first establishments of their kind in Cairo. Cashmere, fabric, shoes, and various other goods are on display. The salesperson encourages effendis to buy their daughters' trousseaus while everything is on sale and pleads with wealthy rural landowners to make purchases as well.

Large groups of people initially respond with rhyming, nonsensical lyrics that transform into a critique of the store owner. "You are living a fake life! You take money from the weak! You are the bad ones, eating up what is by right the peoples'," they say. "They think they're civilized . . . they are more deadly than Raya and Sakina."³⁸ The crowd is an angry mob, saying it has been treated unfairly and left with nothing. "We sleep, we eat, and that seems to be about all."

The scene changes again and returns to Kishkish who comically explains that he was eating a meal with a fork (a sign of his civility and modernity) when he saw an attractive woman across the street. He left his food and ran out to meet her, greeting her in both Arabic and English. But an effendi following behind them worries Kishkish. He thinks the man may be her husband. The man turns out to be someone else, but when the effendi gets close, he tells the woman to leave Kishkish "with the ugly face" and join him instead since his pockets are full of money. As the men begin to fight, the effendi removes his tarbush to expose a hidden *'imma*, or turban. Ordinarily, the tarbush was a sign of a modern, urban, and educated respectability that set effendis apart from aristocrats and the broader population. But in this scene the tarbush is an artifice and removing it reveals the abiding truth: a religious and, by implication, anti-modern man lurked underneath.

The woman scolds the men for fighting: "What a shame. That's your brother! . . . Consider me your sister. Would you accept that your sister be treated this way?" Kishkish acknowledges her point. She is a moral voice of reason and respectability, a reminder of his place in the Egyptian family.

Another patriotic song follows. "Our country, the country of gardens," the chorus praises, concluding with a lengthy message extolling the youth of the country to rise, be proud, unify, and stop destroying themselves with imported vices.

"It's a shame that we destroy ourselves with vice," they sing. Love for Egypt should surpass religious divisions. "We vow that Muslims, Christians, and Jews will not separate."³⁹

By the 1920s, a new group of literary critics were calling for the creation of a modern Egyptian theater that mirrored real life while offering the audience moral edification as well.⁴⁰ They believed that theater could blossom only by embracing realism on the stage.⁴¹ Humor was acceptable, but it had to be more intellectual than corporeal. Similar to the nineteenth-century European bourgeoisie, these critics sought to cultivate manners, morality, and civility. They believed that the proscenium stage was the ideal place for such an education, as it could teach aestheticized moral sensibilities. Comedy that might unleash wild abandon was denigrated as incorrect use of the stage.

Such conversations occurred within a larger framework of individuals concerned about acting in general. In June 1915, for example, a theater critic for *al-Ahram* wrote a piece entitled, “Arabic Acting: A Dangerous Trend,” in which he accused vaudeville of displaying “corrupted colloquial” and “inappropriately vulgar” subject matter.⁴² One year later, an article in *al-Minbar* described vaudeville as “morally dangerous” and accused it of “leading minds astray and corrupting souls.”⁴³ Other headlines from the period—“Countering Pernicious Acting” and “The Case [Against] Comedic Acting”—make clear the danger that cultural elites felt vaudeville posed to society as a whole.⁴⁴

Critics were prolific in justifying their concerns. One blamed “Egyptian audiences for not appreciating the genius of a great actor like [dramatic actor Jurj] Abyad and turning away from his theater and toward the (irritating) comedic theater.”⁴⁵ Another claimed, “theaters that are playing vaudeville and the like are overstuffed with men and women, who are exposed to [lessons in] lewdness and public indecency. In the meanwhile, a small theater like Abyad’s is often barren with few spectators.”⁴⁶ The mixing of the sexes and exposure to “vulgarity” in the theater threatened gender norms, exposed individuals to corrupting influences, and dignified the bad taste of the mass public. Taken together, critics intimated that vaudeville and comedy threatened social and moral order.

One critic was quite explicit. In a preface to a book of his own plays, Uthman Sabri wrote, “Vaudeville is the lowest type of theater, as it has no purpose but bare amusement, like dancing, joking, and acrobatics. Moreover,

the most dissolute type of it . . . is an offensive violation of morals. Thus, it becomes a danger to public morality.⁴⁷ Implicit in his statement was an argument about appropriate, meaningful uses of leisure. Mere amusement was, to him, a mismanagement of time. Leisure for the emerging middle class should be edifying, and edification involved cultivating values of self-discipline, work, emotional regulation, and patriotism that contributed to the overall health of the nation. It was a class-based critique that expected even entertainment to contribute to the creation of a docile citizenry. Thus, the portrayal of vice on the dramatic stage presented a potentially corrupting influence.

An edifying theater would not have the same negative effect. Critic Nazmi Effendi argued that, on such a stage, “sin reveals itself in the worst light . . . a guilty person sees the horrible deeds of his criminal life on stage . . . he is moved and his conscience makes him feel guilt.” He continues: “As children get educated in school with professors and shaykhs, adults get educated in the theater. . . when our teachers’ lessons are good for our psyches, they will correct our condition.”⁴⁸ Portraying “sin” on stage might prompt adults to see their own shameful behavior and its devastating effects. Consequently, theater could change each viewer’s psyche and heal the whole of society.⁴⁹

For some critics, Rihani was talentless. Prominent critic and playwright Muhammad Taymur, for example, devoted much thought to Rihani’s strand of comedy. “Rihani is not an actor,” he argued. He was just a stage persona who did and said anything that came to mind.⁵⁰ Those who enjoy Rihani, Taymur argued, liked him because they had lacked opportunity to cultivate good taste.

But while Rihani’s enemies accused him of annihilating true acting, Taymur did not agree. After writing for several pages criticizing Rihani, his writers, and his fans, Taymur ultimately concluded that Rihani “is very important to the life of acting in Egypt.” He drew this conclusion not because of the quality of Rihani’s performances, but because he feared that the parallel trend of “serious theater” could be the death knell for acting since it was lifeless and inspired no hope. Rihani’s work, on the other hand, maintained the people’s interest in the theater and saved acting from dying out. Despite the trivialities of vaudeville, Taymur argued, it could be a stepping stone to reviving “real,” quality theater.⁵¹ Rihani may not have genius, but he could serve as a conduit for better talents to follow.

For other critics, it was the portrayal of vice—specifically through comedy—that was the major concern. They argued that humor confused audiences instead of edifying them. Critics' suspicion of laughter was not new. Such sentiment can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle, who feared not just frivolity but, more significantly, the loss of control it might elicit from both the individual and the collectivity.⁵² Mocking leaders and social norms could weaken their status, diminish their authority, and lead to unexpected social and political outcomes. As literary theorist Terry Eagleton notes, until today, "there is always a problem with comedy about how far you can go before an admissible bout of high spirits escalates into verbal or conceptual anarchy."⁵³

A concern with anarchy resembles concerns over the effects of *tarab* on audiences. The ability of a singer to create a feeling of *tarab*, a form of ecstatic engagement in audience members, was, on one hand, indicative of the performer's authenticity and talent.⁵⁴ But the bodily experience of the rapture that *tarab* induced meant, by definition, the surrender of bodily restraint and order. Laughter could have a similar effect, and for cultural leaders concerned with the discipline and moral education of broader society, such an emotional and physical response was cause for concern. After all, no one—Rihani, fellow actors, or writers—could control "the linguistic, social, or political effects of uncontrollable laughter" and song.⁵⁵ What effects might mocking portrayals of clueless effendis, greedy elites, and self-serving shaykhs have once audiences left the theater?

Notably, elites, including statesmen of the uppermost echelon, attended Rihani's performances even as they lamented them.⁵⁶ In his memoirs, Rihani recalls several occasions when government ministers visited his theater.⁵⁷ And the music and comedy from his performances entertained elites outside the physical space of the theater as well. When Isma'il Sidqi Pasha, minister of agriculture from 1914-1917, visited Prime Minister Sa'd Zaghlul at his farm, Sidqi's children performed sketches and songs from Kishkish vaudeville plays for the adults.⁵⁸ Rihani maintained this broad appeal despite concerns about the supposed trivialities of what appeared on stage.⁵⁹

Language play, random and unexpected scene changes, oddly juxtaposed content, suggestive sexuality, and surprising hypocrisy contributed to the hilarity of Rihani's shows.⁶⁰ In *Diqqat al-Mu'allim*, quick shifts in scene between Kishkish as a physician to a womanizer roaming for prostitutes

offer incongruities to audiences to provoke laughter.⁶¹ The abrupt transition from his lofty self-representation to trivialities and nonsense was a device that lies at the heart of many kinds of humor.

But his comedy was not devoid of meaning nor was it simply nonsensical entertainment. It also provided a moral and political vision. In *Diqqat al-Mu'allim*, a woman he comically flirts with turns the tables and shames him, seeing him as her brother and demanding respect. This scene is not the only one in which a woman serves as the voice of reason and morality in Rihani's performances. In these scenes, Rihani's nonsense is suddenly reversed and his embarrassment and humiliation deliver a moral lesson: that fakery and flattery are meaningless, and dignity comes from acknowledging a shared humanity.⁶²

While Kishkish's banter and insolence were hilarious precisely because of his disregard for social norms, each provocative scene is followed by a song that mediates these transgressions between actors and audiences. Kishkish heads to the prostitutes' quarters, for example, and a song embracing the Egyptian flag interrupts the scene. After he enjoys a flirtation with a woman named Lucy, the focus shifts to individuals indicting an exploitative department store owner through song.⁶³ Kishkish's flirtation with a woman on the street is followed by unveiling the hypocrisy of the effendi, and the show concludes with a song about overcoming religious differences.⁶⁴

Rihani's ability to both challenge and reassure audiences lay in the juxtaposition of humor with and careful placement of patriotic songs. Much of the music in his productions, usually crafted by the renowned composer Sayyid Darwish, tended to be in the form of the *taqtuqa*, a short, light, catchy piece sung in colloquial Arabic by a solo singer accompanied by a small musical ensemble. *Taqatiq* were much shorter than other genres and therefore fit easily on the three minute per side limit of early 78 rpm shellac records.⁶⁵ Egyptian critics, however, considered the *taqtuqa* frivolous and expressed alarm at its popularity. Its mass appeal may partly explain largely effendi cultural critics' disapproval of the genre, since it violated their standards of artistic musical forms. The industry's insistence on shorter, pre-composed songs with little or no improvisation was commercially viable but considered by critics to be an inauthentic adaptation. Nationalist historiography of music sees the "*taqtuqa* era" as an "all-time low in Egyptian

music: vulgar lyrics, bad music, unrefined musicians, dissolute singers, drunken British soldiers roaming the streets of Cairo for cheap entertainment in ill-reputed cabarets.”⁶⁶

Rihani and his lyricists, however, used the same genre to sing songs about unity, shared identity, and Egyptian patriotism. “Death is better than oppression,” he sang in *Diqqat al-Mu'allim*. “The Nile arises with your awakening.” He reminds his audience of the pride of their ancient Egyptian past and entreats them to recall the greatness of their ancestors. Rihani and his co-writers, through Kishkish Bey, echoed concerns voiced primarily by effendis who worried that Western influences were eating away at Egyptians’ morality. They expressed concerns that foreigners in Egypt were economically exploiting Egyptians and overcoming these challenges depended on national solidarity.

And yet, the possibility for subversion remained. There was danger in celebrating the Everyman and cultivating pride in a shared, common identity. After all, a shared identity was the foundation upon which individuals might stake claims and demand recognition of their rights and place in Egyptian life. It could threaten a social order that relegated the urban worker to lesser status and offered the effendi pride of place in a modernizing Egypt. Mirth may not upend this new state of affairs, but farce mocked authority and undermined those in power and the hierarchy they relied upon.⁶⁷

Indeed, one of the most important and least understood aspects of theater is how it is experienced communally. The festive occasion of a comedic performance provided context for audiences to react with laughter rather than indignation at the mockery of the powerful.⁶⁸ The physical space of a performance (theater or street), intent of the actors (to mock or to destroy), and numerous intangible characteristics of audiences (sensitivities, frame of mind) all played roles in how comedy was received.⁶⁹ Audiences who laugh together might communally experience catharsis and a unifying effect among all in attendance—rich, poor, old, young, male, female, laborer, and politician.⁷⁰ Those liminal, unifying moments as a temporarily bonded group could have lasting effects. The theater was, on the surface, a safe space of entertainment, but for those who surrendered to it, the potential for imaginative transformation superseded any limits that those in power proscribed over other facets of daily life.⁷¹

Rihani's performances worked on several levels. He used humor and song to simultaneously entertain and communicate social and political commentary. Rihani successfully yoked stock characters of street performance who were widely known to the new conventions of the proscenium stage and the socio-political context of his time. His operettas and revues had meaning beyond superficial entertainment. They mirrored the values that effendis promulgated in Egyptian society: youth, beauty, innocence, good intentions, strong/moral women. Rihani's stage was a place to challenge elite greed and hypocrisy, to play with modern ideals of strong women and sexuality with humor. His message held to account the very same old and new elites who criticized him in his audience, but because it was funny, it did so in unobtrusive ways.

Rihani navigated concerns about comedy in his revues and operettas through his use of patriotic sentiment and song, enacting an ideal of a unified national identity. He creatively promoted religious, class, and gender unity through humor. In this way, he was "reinforcing social norms by demonstrating how remarkably resilient they are, how good-humouredly capable [they are] of surviving any amount of mockery."⁷² Taking this interpretation into consideration, it is possible to claim that Rihani's humor was a potent vindication of the status quo.

Philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of laughter illuminates here. He describes laughter as "one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole...it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from a serious standpoint."⁷³ This potential for seeing the world anew, understanding it with a clarity that one may not have had before, caused much anxiety for those in a position to lose control of authority, order, and citizens' bodies. But even they could not resist the lure and joy of laughter and the leveling effect this offered, providing a momentary glimpse into what society could be.

ENDNOTES

- 1 'Umda roughly translates as "village mayor." *Al-Sayf*, 27 March 1921, quoted in *al-Masrah al-Misri al-Mawsim al-Masrahi 1921* (Cairo: Dar al-Za'im li-l-Tiba'a al-Haditha, 2002), 105.
- 2 Laila Nessim Abou Seif, "Theatre of Najib al-Rihani: The Development of Comedy in Modern Egypt" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1969), 73, 86; Magda Baraka, *The Egyptian Upper Class Between Revolutions: 1919-1952* (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 1998).
- 3 Najib Effendi al-Rihani, Badi' Khayri, and Husayn Effendi Shafiq, *Diqqat al-Mu'allim* (Cairo: Maktaba wa Matba'at al-Wahida al-Wataniyya, 1921), 2.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 A proscenium is a plane separating a stage from the audience. It contains within it an arch and curtain. The idea is that audiences view happenings on stage through a frame that separates the actors from those who come to watch them. The proscenium theater is quite different from forms of street theater where there is more physical proximity and engagement between audiences and performers.
- 6 Despite his historical prominence, scholarly writing on Rihani is rather limited. Works that explore his output and contributions include Abou Seif, "Theatre of Najib al-Rihani," Amin Bakir, *Najib al-Rihani* (Cairo: Matba'at al-Majlis al-'A'la li-l-Athar, 1997); Ziad Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation Through Popular Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Nelly Hanna, *In Praise of Books: A Cultural History of Cairo's Middle Class* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003); Ali al-Ra'i, *al-Kumidiyya al-Murtajala fi al-Masrah al-Misri* (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1968); Sha'ban Yusuf, *Najib al-Rihani al-Mudhakkirat al-Majhula* (Cairo: Battana, 2017).
- 7 Muhammad Taymur, *Hayatuna al-tamthiliyya* (Cairo: Matba'at al-I'timad: 1922), 94.
- 8 Frederic Lagrange, "Women in the Singing Business, Women in Songs," *History Compass* 7, no. 1 (2009), 247.
- 9 Amr Zakaria Abd Allah, "The Theory of Theatre for Egyptian Nationalists in the First Quarter of the Twentieth Century," *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 4 (2009): 204.
- 10 Abou Seif, "Theatre of Najib al-Rihani," 23-24.
- 11 Najib al-Rihani, *Mudhakkirat Najib al-Rihani: Za'im al-Masrah al-Fukahi* (Cairo: al-Mutahhida li-l-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr, 2000), 13.
- 12 Ibid., 15-16, 24.
- 13 Theater critic Muhammad Taymur coined the term "serious theater" (*al-masrah al-jaddi*) to describe Arabic drama performed in classical Arabic that was considered more prestigious than the popular comedies and musical theater of the time. For more on Abyad's role in promoting serious theater, see Samah F. Hanna, "Decommercializing Shakespeare: Mutran's Othello," in *Shakespeare and the Arab World*, eds. Katherine Hennessey and Margaret Litvin (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 35-62.
- 14 Al-Rihani, *Mudhakkirat*, 13-15.
- 15 Ibid., 15-22.
- 16 Ibid., 20-21.
- 17 According to a critic who wrote for *al-Minbar*, "Rihani sighed and asked, 'When will the war end so I can produce an Egyptian comedy of errors?'" "Radd 'ala M. Sh.," *al-Minbar*, reproduced in Yusuf, *Najib al-Rihani*, 209.
- 18 Al-Rihani, *Mudhakkirat*, 25.
- 19 Al-Ra'i, *al-Kumidiyya al-Murtajala*, 8.
- 20 Cynthia Metcalf, "From Morality Play to Celebrity: Women, Gender, and Performing Modernity in Egypt, 1850-1939" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 2008), 206.
- 21 For more on Jalal, see Carol Bardenstein, *Translation and Transformation in Modern Arabic*

- Literature: The Indigenous Assertions of Muhammad Uthman Jalal* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005); Adam Mestyan, "Muhammed Yusuf Najm—A Maker of the Nahda," *al-Abhath* 64 (1 October 2016), 97-118.
- 22 See Irene Gendzier, *The Practical Visions of Ya'qub Sanu'* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Middle Eastern Monographs, 1966). The author of a contemporary article in *al-Minbar* also recognized Rihani's work as being grounded in the history of performance in Egypt. See "The Response to M. Sh." *al-Minbar*, 24 September 1918, reproduced in Yusuf, *Najib al-Rihani*, 208-209.
- 23 Ibrahim Ramzi, *al-Masrah*, 8 August 1927.
- 24 Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians*, 127.
- 25 Abou Seif, "Theatre of Najib al-Rihani," 63.
- 26 Al-Rihani, *Mudhakkirat*, 21.
- 27 See, for example, *al-Muqattam*, 16 March 1922; *Ruz al-Yusuf*, 28 December 1925.
- 28 *Al-Sayf*, 27 March 1921.
- 29 *Express*, 6 July 1919, reproduced in Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians*, 161.
- 30 Abou Seif, "Theatre of Najib al-Rihani," 73.
- 31 Muhammad Taymur, "Al-Rihani . . . Between His Followers and His Critics," *al-Minbar* 26 August 1918, reproduced in Yusuf, *Najib al-Rihani*, 202. Rihani recorded songs with Mechian and Odeon records. Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians*, 125.
- 32 Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians*, 124.
- 33 Al-Rihani, *Mudhakkirat*, 27, 33.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 38, 46, 48, 128. In the Syrian case, his imitator was known as "Qashqash."
- 35 *Al-Sayf*, 27 March 1921, reproduced in *al-Masrah al-Misri*, 105.
- 36 *Misr*, 2 April 1921 and 29 April 1921, reproduced in *al-Masrah al-Misri*, 112 and 164; *al-Akhbar*, 6 April 1921, reproduced in *al-Masrah al-Misri*, 116; *al-Akhbar*, 7 April 1921, reproduced in *al-Masrah al-Misri*, 120. Rihani would bring the show back to the stage the following year for one week as part of a three-month extravaganza of theater. *Al-Muqattam*, 16 March, 1922, reproduced in *al-Masrah al-Misri al-Mawsim al-Masrahi* 1922, 87-88.
- 37 *Al-Masrah al-Misri*, 6-11.
- 38 Raya and Sakina were infamous serial killers in Alexandria in the early twentieth century. Al-Rihani, Khayri, and Shafiq, *Diqqat al-Mu'allim*, 11-13.
- 39 Al-Rihani, Khayri, and Shafiq, *Diqqat al-Mu'allim*, 17.
- 40 See, for example, articles in Sulayman Hassan al-Qabbani, *Bughyat al-Mumaththilin* (Alexandria: Jurji Gharzuzi, 1914) and journals like *al-Mashriq*, 2 (1899): 20-23; 71-74; and *al-Muqtataf*, 1 (August 1926): 223-24.
- 41 Abd Allah, "The Theory of Theatre," 196.
- 42 *Al-Ahram*, 8 June 1915, reproduced in Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians*, 129.
- 43 *Al-Minbar*, March 1916, reproduced in Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians*, 129.
- 44 Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians*, 129.
- 45 Muhammad Taymur, "Muhakima Mu'allifi al-Riwaya al-Tamthiliyya," *al-Sufur*, as reprinted in *Mu'allafat Muhammad Taymur al-Juz' al-Thani, Hayatuhu al-Tamthiliyya* (Cairo: al-Hay'at al-Misriyya al-'amma li-l-Kitab, 1963).
- 46 *Al-Minbar*, 3 September 1918.
- 47 Abd Allah, "The Theory of Theatre," 196.
- 48 Al-Qabbani, *Bughyat*, 128-31.
- 49 See Carmen Gitre, *Acting Egyptian: Theater and Identity in Cairo, 1869-1930* (Austin: University of Texas Press: 2019).
- 50 Taymur, "Al-Rihani," 203.

- 51 Ibid., 206. When Rihani transitioned from vaudeville to operetta, Taymur seemed more convinced of the potential of Rihani's work. He even collaborated with Rihani to adapt a play called "The Ten of Diamonds" (*al-Ashara al-Tayyiba*), a patriotic attack on the former Mamluk rulers of Egypt. Performed in March 1920 as an opera-comique, it had at least one song in each of its scenes. And yet, the play failed. Because it criticized Turks just after the Ottoman losses in World War I, audiences were suspicious that it was meant as propaganda promoting supposedly benevolent British imperialism. Abou Seif, "Theatre of Najib al-Rihani," 87; al-Rihani, *Mudhakkirat*, 31.
- 52 Terry Eagleton, *Humour* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2019), 96.
- 53 Ibid., 92.
- 54 For more on tarab, see 'Ali Jihad Racy, *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Tarab* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- 55 Michiel Leezenberg, "Comedy Between Performativity and Polyphony: The Politics of Non-Serious Language," in *The Performance of the Comic In Arabic Theatre: Cultural Heritage Western Models and Postcolonial Hybridity*, ed. Mieke Kolk and Freddy Decreus (The Hague: Prince Claus Foundation, 2005), 207.
- 56 Al-Rihani, *Mudhakkirat*, 82.
- 57 Ibid., 60, 82.
- 58 Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians*, 124.
- 59 This reality throws a wrench into any attempt to fully apply Bakhtin's theory of carnival here. Bakhtin divides the world into a binary of serious, authoritarian elites and a laughing majority with no inhibitions. The divide in the Egyptian case is not so stark. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 70.
- 60 Theories about how comedy and laughter work abound, but what seems to be the most popular and the most fitting in this context is the theory of incongruity. As Terry Eagleton explains, things are funny when there is a "sudden shift of perspective, an unexpected slippage of meaning, an arresting dissonance" and other examples of clashing incongruous situations or events. Eagleton, *Humour*, 67. Other explanations of how humor works include: play, conflict, ambivalence, dispositional, mastery, Gestalt, Piagetian, and configurational theories.
- 61 Eagleton, *Humour*, 21.
- 62 Ibid., 24-25. As Eagleton explains, "if we rejoice in seeing the high brought low, a deflation which allows us to relax a certain psychological tension, it is partly because we can now condescend to those by whom we were previously intimidated." Ibid., 15.
- 63 Al-Rihani, Khayri, and Shafiq, *Diqqat al-Mu'allim*, 11.
- 64 Ibid., 14.
- 65 'Ali Jihad Racy, "Arabian Music and the Effects of Commercial Recording," *World of Music* 20, no. 1 (1978), 47-55.
- 66 Lagrange, "Women in the Singing Business," 247.
- 67 Perhaps scholar Michiel Leezenberg said it best, "What comedy does is not so much criticize dominant ideas or ideologies, but expose the game-like character of our most serious practices. ... It need not lead to a radical, subversive or revolutionary questioning of the social world we live in; but it may well do so." Leezenburg, "Comedy," 206.
- 68 Ibid., 206.
- 69 Ibid., 195-209.
- 70 In a sociological sense, "leveling effect" might refer to the effect of enforcing shared morality on a group of people, the effects of equal access to technology, and/or the diminishing of

hierarchies based on gender, race and ethnicity, and social class. See, for example, Anas Karzai, *Nietzsche and Sociology: Prophet of Affirmation* (New York: Lexington Books, 2019); Greg Martin, *Understanding Social Movements* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

- 71 I am influenced here by neuroscientist Sophie Scott and her work on the social experience of laughter. See, for example, L. Neves, C. Cordeiro, S. K. Scott, S. L. Castro, and C. F. Lima, "High Emotional Contagion and Empathy are Associated with Enhanced Detection of Emotional Authenticity in Laughter," *Sage Publications* 71, no. 11 (Winter 2018): 2355-2363, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1747021817741800>.
- 72 Eagleton, *Humour*, 14.
- 73 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 66.