

A Bridge Through Time^(*)

A Memoir

By Laila Said

A dramatic, intense and honest book that reveals the experiences and alienation of *Laila Said* who was introduced in *Al-Raida*, May 1, 1980, No. 12, as a pioneer film and theatre producer in Egypt.

The book was reviewed by many critics, and the following are two reviews that appeared in the Middle East and the Social Studies.

Nora Peck from the Middle East wrote:

Towards the end of *Laila Abou Saif's* inspiring memoir, a former teaching colleague, a man, tells her with admiration, «You're a fighter, Laila, and this is not a society which admires aggressive women.» Though *Abou Saif* has spent her life surrounded by conflict in the Arab world, as an Egyptian woman she is not allowed to take part in it.

The memoir, which begins with *Abou Saif's* efforts to postpone an arranged marriage and follows her through an American college education, divorce, and a successful career as a theatre and film director, is the story of how one woman discovers her own more effective method of battle. As *Abou Saif* evolves into a feminist, she discovers that this career is inseparable from her life as the devotion she feels to her stubborn culture.

A Bridge Through Time is at its best when relating *Abou Saif's* personal struggles, and at its weakest when she attempts to weave in the background of the political changes in Egypt over a twenty year period. Though this information is certainly integral to her story, it is often made separate and unclear, which to the uninformed reader will only slow down a story that moves at the pace of a good novel.

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Abou Saif has all the characteristics of the traditional heroine; constantly faced with obstacles, she persists, and succeeds. As a teenager, faced with an arranged marriage, she persuades her educated and well-connected father to let her finish her studies in Chicago. This brings on an identity crisis of sorts, one that will haunt her throughout her life, as Western freedom is so tempting.

Though the marriage ultimately takes place, *Abou Saif* is able to finish her doctoral thesis in record time. A study of the actor-manager *Najib al-Rihani*, the creator of Egyptian social comedy in the 1930s and '40s, the thesis leads *Abou Saif* into her work as a director and helps her develop a goal, that of finding a theatre that will reach her people.

This would seem a way, finally, out of the identity crisis and an unhappy marriage, but with success comes a new obstacle. Under the new, seemingly liberal *Sadat* government, *Abou Saif's* productions are challenged by censors who deem the plays politically unsound. She turns to documentary film-making and participation in world feminism, and finds that film is the strongest way she can expose and perhaps alter the plight of women in the Arab world.

Despite the occasional lapse from clear straightforward prose into poetic images that seem to belong to a different kind of person, *Saif's* story leaves the reader wanting to tell her, as the same colleague finally does, «There's still so much for you to do here. Don't give up.»

Ahdaf Soueif from the Social Studies:

Laila Abou Saif's A Bridge Through Time spans a period of almost twenty-five years; from her betrothal in Cairo in 1958 to her departure for America and a teaching job in the University of New Haven a couple of years ago. There are many faults to be found in these memoirs. At the most basic level, almost every Arabic word that occurs is inaccurate. To take the most flagrant examples: the word which President *Abd el-Nasser* used to describe the defeat of 1967 — and which came to identify the entire era from 1967 to 1973 — was *naksa* not *nakba*. The word used by *Anwar Sadat* when he wanted to allow a degree of diversity of

political opinion but was reluctant to condone any *ahzab* (parties) was *manabir* (forums) not *nawabir*. The oft-heard Islamic cry is *Allah-u-Akbar* not *Akhbar*. The *karawan* (not *qarawan*), which still sings in some parts of Cairo, is the curlew not the nightingale, and so on. These mistakes embody one of the reasons why *Ms. Abou Saif* found it so difficult to get on in Egypt: denimed, divorced and American-educated at a time when none of these things was common, she was also demanding to be taken seriously as the first Egyptian woman stage director — and she was making this demand in flawed Arabic.

This verbal inaccuracy is mirrored by a factual one: the *mogama'* is not an «octagonal building of about nine floors» but a rectangular eleven-storeyed one. An apartment in Zamalek would not overlook a «tributary of the Nile» but the Nile itself. «My country, my country» is not merely «a patriotic song» but the Egyptian National Anthem. The 1952 burning of Cairo was more or less established as the doing of *Misr al Fatah* (a neo-fascist society) and not the Muslim Brotherhood. High-fliers pre-1966 did not go to the Sheraton Hotel (which had not yet been built) but to the Semiramis «Night and Day». The list could go on. One would have thought that Quartet, part of the Namara Group, would be equipped with an editor who can pick up this sort of thing — but apparently not.

In its straightforward bits, *A Bridge Through Time* is very readable. But then suddenly it appears that a need is felt for some «style» — and that's when things go wrong; here is *Ms. Abou Saif* observing the felucca boatmen on the Nile: «These boatmen's lives had not changed for thousands of years. Yet I found a strange comfort in observing the life of my ancestors reassert itself with primeval confidence, the still point of Egypt.» And here she is entering a seminar room: «I found an esoteric group of Arab and Western scholars... engrossed in learned talk.»...

Whatever its faults, *A Bridge Through Time* has its heart in the right place. It captures some of the climate in Egypt from 1967 to 1981 and it describes some significant and authentic incidents. If the frankness with which it is written signals that *Ms. Abou Saif* has now left Egypt for good, then that would be a pity.