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"The Secret Pocket": A Theatrical Success for Lebanese Director Siham Nasser

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Dramatic art, for Lebanese director Siham Nasser, means not only survival, as she phrases it, but life itself. After earning a degree in Theatre Production from the American Catholic University in Washington, D.C., she began teaching dramatic art at the Lebanese University in Beirut, where she is still working today. Nasser also acted in many plays and produced many others adapted from the world repertoire. Siham Nasser first received international recognition in 1992, when her play, *The Secret Pocket*, adapted from a novel by Rashid Boujedra, won the first prize at the International Festival for Experimental Theatre in Cairo. Earlier that same year, the Beirut Theatre had produced the play. Subsequently, it was also performed at the Gulbenkian Theatre of the Lebanese American University and at the Russian Cultural Center in Beirut. Adapted into French, *The Secret Pocket* was recently performed at the French Cultural Center in Beirut and is now heading towards France and Carthage.

What accounts for the phenomenal success of *The Secret Pocket*? What is the theme of this unusual play? In broad outline, the play is the story of a man from a Third World country who suddenly discovers that his

city has been invaded by five million mice. The State appoints this man director of an office for the extermination of the annoying and destructive pests. The setting of the play is reminiscent of Beirut; it portrays a game which repeats itself *ad infinitum*, revealing its plot in a mosaic of colors, dark at one moment, comic the next.

But *The Secret Pocket* does not tell a conventional story; it unfolds more like a symphony than a play, because the actors repeat and reiterate a dramatic melody which varies in polyphonic rhythms, rhythms borrowed from traditional oriental orchestras. Unlike classical drama, the play ends not on a note of resolution, but in a deadlock, like a game of chess ending in checkmate.

Political overtones abound in *The Secret Pocket*. The play had a great impact on its Lebanese audience, who viewed it at the Beirut Theatre soon after the signing of the Taef Agreement of 1990, the accord which brought the Lebanese civil war to an end. The audience flocked to the theatre feeling bruised after so many years of war, but also so happy to meet at a cultural event during peace-time. When the curtain rose, the staging

was powerfully arresting: 21 immobile actors in a triangular arrangement stood paralyzed, dressed normally, but with their faces grotesquely made-up. The stage was filled with scraps of newspaper, evoking the image of a large waste basket. For Beirutis, newspapers connote absurd news stories of Beckettian cease-fires which continuously broke down, then were patched up only to break down again, *a la Godot*. Beckett's *Godot* and Camus' *Oran* in *The Plague* were ever present in the audience's collective imagination as they watched the play. The absurdist vein of contemporary theatre underlay an absurd situation, an absurd war, and an absurd peace treaty which left all conflicts unresolved.

The success of *The Secret Pocket* was fully deserved. The play demonstrated the technical brilliance of Siham Nasser, as well as her sensitivity to human nature and her black humor. Her actors were no less brilliant under her able direction. *The Secret Pocket* touches upon the existential realities of a wounded city and its wounded citizens in a compelling and memorable way. It was an excellent example of theatre which speaks resoundingly to its time and place, and now, with its warm reception in France, to all times and places.