

# THE STORYTELLER HASSAN EL GERETLY

Photographs: Nabil Boutros  
Text: Nile El Wardani





As I entered an ancient splendid building West il Balad and made my way up the endless spiral staircase of worn marble and ironworks to the top floor I found a bustling atmosphere of artists, singers, instrumental musicians and spectators spanning all the lands of Egypt. Forty young Egyptian singers, men and women, three rababa players from Upper Egypt and two tabla players readied themselves. Stick dancers stood by with stick in hand.

As the rehearsal began, I turned to the young man sitting next to me. I asked him if he had come for the music, the dance or the theatre. Without hesitation he replied, "I came for the poetry." He explained to me that he was from Aswan and the ancient poetry of Seerat Bani Helal would soon be sung. He was intimately familiar with the poetry. His grandfather had always recited and sung this ancient text. He claimed that all Upper Egyptians know this poetry. When I asked him who wrote it, he replied "everyone and no one." Indeed he was correct. Composed by thousands of people, there is no one person to whom the three million plus lines of poetry can be attributed. This poetry spread throughout all the adjoining lands via the Shaa'er AlSeera, carrier of the poetry, who travelled from village to village, country to country reciting and enjoining the people to add their own voices and words. Thousands of

carriers of the poetic verse lived amongst the people repeating the stories embedded in the poetry. It was their calling and their livelihood. And the people of every land contributed to this magnificent timeless poetry, which has no rival in the world. Even the Iliad and the Odyssey do not compare to the scope, depth and measure of Seerat Bani Helal.

This story mesmerized me and when the singing began I was further taken away by the beauty and mystery of this remarkable history, poetry and music. The hypnotic strumming of the three-rababa players in their flowing galabeyas and the robust heart beating rhythms of the tabla players sent me into a trance. As I opened my eyes, I was astonished to see that almost all of the participants and the on-lookers were young Egyptians who were evoking and connecting to their cultural past.

A very unique Egyptian man Hassan El Geretly whose mission in life has been to find inspiration in daily life, through Egyptian history, ancient culture and Egypt's popular cultures, created this magical scene. El Geretly seeks to enlighten young Egyptians and draw them back to their very-own magnificent culture and history. The process involves a great deal of research, vocational training and outreach work.

In 1987, El Geretly founded El Warsha Theatre Company in Egypt, which endeavours to develop an



Dance at the Medhat Fawzy Center for the stick arts in Mallawi.

alternative cultural milieu by collaborating with artists, musicians, actors, dancers and reciters throughout Egypt, the Arab World and beyond. El Geretly's artistic methodology is long term and cumulative. He believes that the creative process is about the journey and unravelling the path. It is about being present while preserving a dialogue between the past and the future. Above all it is about storytelling.

Hassan El Geretly studied theatre and French literature at the University of Bristol in the UK. He received a higher diploma in audio-visual staging (cinema, video and radio) at the Sorbonne University in Paris. He has worked in both theatre and cinema since the 1970's in France and Egypt as an actor and assistant director. He became deputy director of the Centre Dramatique National du Limousin in France and founded the touring theatre company Les Tréteaux de la Terre et du Vent that toured throughout France from 1975 to 1980. Returning to Egypt, El Geretly founded El Warsha theatre company in 1987. He was appointed director of the first experimental theatre in Cairo in 1988 but resigned in 1992 to devote himself entirely to the independent theatre.

El Geretly pursues theatrical forms that embrace the rhythm of life, united together by a quest for new horizons of awe and astonishment. By communicating our cultural world-view, El Warsha works in parallel on the creative process by reaching in and reaching out to create new spheres of intercultural triumphs. El Warsha has performed and toured locally and internationally, within the Arab World and beyond and was the first Egyptian company invited to the famous Avignon Festival in France.



Hassan El Geretly founder of El Warsha Theatre.

El Geretly enjoys breaking the mould. He started by freely adapting and "Egyptianizing" Western plays such as those by Peter Handke, Dario Fo, Franca Rame, Harold Pinter, Franz Kafka and Alfred Jarry. El Warsha has also explored traditional Egyptian art performances that preceded the introduction of European theatre into Egypt in the 19th Century, creating their own plays after long periods of research and training.

In addition to presenting rare theatrical, musical and poetry recitation performances, El Warsha offers on-going training opportunities for young artists. As a result many young Egyptian singers, musicians, actresses and actors have found their way to fame.

El Warsha has cooperated with the Jesuits and Brothers Association in Minya to form a Centre for the Performing Arts, training children and amateur artists. They have also established a centre for teaching the ancient art of stick dancing in Upper Egypt in the city of Mallawi, Minya. Everywhere that El Warsha works and performs there is outreach to the people, all the people, rich or poor.

El Geretly believes strongly in the power of storytelling. While he adores dance, and once pined to become a dancer, he believes that storytelling via theatre, dance, music, song or poetry is the kernel of change, growth, independent thought and ultimately freedom. Ω



Photo by: Khaled Gouweily

Two of the last masters of shadow theatre ( Khayal El Zhell ) demonstration of shadow playing.



Scene from a sketch at Layaly El Warsha .