

# And so she is dead

– the legendary Fatma Rushdy, the Sarah Bernhardt of the east, as she was dubbed, and how she cherished the title. She made a smooth and graceful exit without the convulsive harangues and heroic declamations that usually accompanied her famous death scenes on stage. In fact, it was one such death-scene that indirectly launched her onto her glorious career as the first woman founder of a theatrical company in the Arab world. It happened in the mid-20s when she was a member of the prestigious Ramses Company, founded by the equally legendary actor and director Youssef Wahbi after his return from Italy. When the company's prima donna, Rose El-Youssef, left the company to pursue a career in journalism and founded the publishing house that still carries her name today, Rushdy became the female lead. Naturally, the choice incensed the young female members, some of whom had joined the company before Rushdy.

There was a lot of spite and bitter-backbiting. Amina Rizq, Rushdy's colleague at the time, admits to this. "She was the wife of the company's director, Aziz 'Eid, and we naturally thought this was behind her choice as leading lady," she says. "It was not until we saw her in the leading parts that we had to admit, however reluctantly that she was truly great," she adds. One night, however, just as Rushdy was coming to the end of an inordinately long dying speech, and building up for a grand finale before collapsing into the arms of her four female attendants, one of whom was Rizq, she caught sight of one of the attendants, the

beautiful actress Zeinab Sidqi, imperceptibly lifting a hand to her mouth to suppress what Rushdy thought a giggle but was in fact a yawn induced by the long, silent vigil. She insisted that Youssef Wahbi kick the culpable attendant out, and when he refused (the actress in question being an asset to the company at a time when female acting talents were scarce) she walked out, taking the husband with her.

Together they set up their own company which carried her name. It was not easy, and, financially it was an uphill struggle. It is doubtful that the project would have taken off if a certain, wealthy gentleman, by the name of Ali Adu'i, had not suddenly and miraculously materialised. Rushdy has described their first meeting in her memoirs and in several interviews. She met him at a night club where she had gone to meet an acquaintance who had promised her a loan. The loan was not forthcoming, but the acquaintance pointed out to her the rich, Jewish businessman and told her to try him. Proud as ever though nearly a pauper, Rushdy insisted that he come to her table and introduce himself. By the end of the evening he had agreed to sponsor her company and arranged to meet her the following morning to settle the matter. On reaching home, she discovered that he had slipped five hundred pounds (a fortune in those days) into her bag without telling her. The next day, Mr. Adu'i took his beautiful protégée shopping, outfitting her as befitted her future status, and finished off by opening a 12,000-pound bank account in her name.

For seven years, the amorous sponsor continued to lavish funds on the company, not minding the heavy losses in terms of cash returns. Thanks to him, Rushdy was able to indulge her wildest acting dreams, performing many classical female as well as male parts, including Cleopatra, La Dame Aux Camelias and Hamlet, and touring Egypt and the Arab world with her performances. As her reputation grew, she began to become a legend. It was during those years that she was called the Sarah Bernhardt of the east. She also became something of a patriotic figure for her attacks on the British occupation of Egypt which led to the closing down of her theatre once or twice. The poor, little Alexandrian girl who was driven by poverty to the stage at the age of ten had come a long way. Legend says that she was the only actress in her time to receive bouquets tied with strings of real pearls.



Sayyid Darwish had been the first to discover her talent; he heard her sing one night in Alexandria with the troupe of Amin Atallah and advised her mother (who had joined the troupe with her three daughters after the death of her Yugoslav husband) to take her to Cairo, the land of golden opportunities. In Cairo, she presented herself to Naguib El-Rihani to work for his company and there she met Aziz 'Eid, her future tutor and husband, and life-long mentor, friend and loyal companion. 'Eid took to her at once and set about educating her (since she couldn't even read or write) and polishing her talent; he brought her several teachers and coached her himself in acting and drama, lavishing on her his long experience. When he finished with her, she had perfect elocution and an impressive artistic range. Predictably, Pygmalion-like, he fell in love with his creation and they married when she was 15. The marriage cost 'Eid his religion since she was a Moslem and he a Copt. How 'Eid felt about the liaison between Rushdy and her newly acquired 'mobile bank' (as she, somewhat callously, described her rich patron in an interview) is impossible to know. He was much older than Rushdy, of course, and knew that however much she respected him as an artist and trusted him as teacher and friend, she had married him primarily to further her career. She admitted once that she had never really been in love, that her passion for theatre had engrossed her totally, leaving no room for any other passion. One tends to believe her. She seems to have regarded men as useful props that enhanced her performance, and Adru'i was no exception. 'Eid must have realised this.

Eventually, however, as tongues began to wag, creating a malicious din, he was forced to make the difficult decision of divorcing her for both their sakes. But their friendship emerged from the crisis unscathed and their professional partnership continued until 1934 when the sponsor withdrew and the company finally went bust. The valedictory performance was *Salome*, played by Rushdy (who else?) and directed by 'Eid. Rushdy's company was not the only one to go bankrupt in the early '30s. It was a period of real crisis for the theatre and most troupes were disbanded. There was suddenly a glut of out-of-work actors. To provide them with employment, the government founded the first Egyptian national theatre company; but Rushdy, too independent to be run by anybody but herself, did not join it

and turned her talents to the silver screen. Her association with the celluloid world had started as early as 1923 when she produced, wrote and directed a two-hour silent movie called *Marriage* in which she starred with Mahmoud El-Meligui. Her first talking movie was *Fadje'a Fawq Al-Haram* (A Tragedy At The Top of the Pyramid) in 1926, and her last was *Da'uni A'ish* (Let Me Live) in 1955. In between, she did 14 films of which the most important and memorable is *Al-'Azitnah* (Will Power). Apart from a trip to Morocco in 1937-38, where she directed two plays, and a single stage appearance in an adaptation of one of Mahfouz' novels (Bayn Al-Qasrein) with the Free Theatre Company in 1959, she stayed away from the theatre. A glamorous career had come to an end, and with it a whole way of life.

Unlike Amina Rizq, her old colleague in Ramses company, who is still very much active in films and on television, Rushdy could not adapt to the chancing world around her, accept old age, and, with it, smaller parts. Rather than play second fiddle, she opted for seclusion and led a frugal life on her measly pension from the Actors' Union. The state honoured her twice, in the reigns of Nasser and Sadat, and the American *Life magazine* celebrated her achievements on four pages in 1964. But medals and magazine articles do not pay the bills. She had saved nothing, except her memories, and her overriding sense of pride and dignity. When she could no longer afford a flat in Cairo, she moved to Suez where she seemed to sink without a trace. She surfaced briefly in 1993 when Karam Metawe', as head of the State Theatre Organisation then, decided to honour her on the Egyptian Theatre Remembrance Day. That night, she forgot her wrinkles and sat in her box, in a pink dress, with short, puffed sleeves, smiling and waving excitedly to everybody. It was heartening and pathetic all at once. In 1995, she was back in the news, but, sadly, as a poor and aged actress who could not pay her hospital bills. It transpired that prior to her hospitalisation she had been living for months in a shabby, dingy *pension* in downtown Cairo. It was shocking, scandalous, outrageous, many artists felt; they rallied round her and bought her a flat in Ma'rouf Street. But three days after she moved into it, and after a long look at the old haunts of her youth out of her window, the magnificent Rushdy quietly slipped away. It was a peaceful,

lonely death, behind the curtains; but, by God, what theatrical timing!

I was fortunate to meet Rushdy at the National Theatre one month before she died, at a gathering held in her honour by the National Centre of the Egyptian Theatre. She looked shaky and fragile, but deeply happy. She obviously enjoyed being surrounded by fans and admirers. I thought how cruel her lonely life in Suez must have been. But as I looked at her carefully henna-dyed hair, fully made-up face and bright green suit I found myself quizzically musing on the delightful, eternal vanity of actresses and divas. Then she started talking, retracing the past, and it felt as if she was growing younger by the minute, lightly shedding off the years as she went on. When we asked her at the end to act for us a short scene from her repertoire she paused for a few minutes, then reeled off in a warm, full-blooded voice, 80 lines from the final scene of Ahmed Shawqi's verse drama, *The Death of Cleopatra*, without a single error or hesitation. She held us in a spell and gave us a taste of the overpowering vitality and charisma that enthralled her lucky audiences in the past. Looking back on that evening I cannot help feeling that Rushdy was really then reciting her own farewell speech, not Cleopatra's.

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*Fatma Rushdy died on January 23, 1996. This article appeared in Al-Ahram Weekly the week after her death.*