



The Public Defense of the Doctoral Dissertation in History

by
Adam Mestyan
on

“A garden with mellow fruits of refinement” - Music Theatres and Cultural Politics
in Cairo and Istanbul, 1867-1892

will be held on

Friday, September 23, 2011 at 11:00

in the

**Hanák room
Central European University (CEU)
Budapest—1051
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Defense Committee

Chair: Aziz Alazmeh, Medieval Studies Department, CEU

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Doctoral Dissertation Abstract

This is a study about cultural politics in the late Ottoman Empire, exploiting archival sources and periodicals. Bringing the state back into discussions of cultural history, I focus on the relations between administrations and music theatres in Cairo and Istanbul in the period of 1867 and 1892. I understand music theatre as an urban laboratory of various interconnected political, social, and artistic experiments. Via music theatres, I explore the creation of culture as a competition where the state appears both as an object to gain and as a participant to win.

In an entangled comparison between Cairo and Istanbul, describing theatre buildings, the activities of Ottoman/Egyptian impresarios and artists, the creative process of performances and the state policies towards these activities, this study reconstructs music theatre as a discursive space where official and non-official visions were articulated and new consumption habits were tested. In case of theatre in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish, this was a constant negotiation that led to alternative institutionalization in Cairo, while it failed in Istanbul, yet both cities became markets for Italian operas and French operettas. Taking a critical stance towards the dominant historiographical role of the state, this study demonstrates the active agency of individuals in the social transformation of the late Ottoman Empire and Egypt.

The dissertation, based on hitherto unexplored archival sources and newspapers, is divided into five parts and within these five parts there are altogether twelve chapters with an introduction. In the Introduction I explain my theoretical framework of cultural politics as a competition over the audience in which the state and its resources are sometimes the prize to win, or sometimes a competitor to fight with. I also clarify my position towards the historiography of Arab and Ottoman Turkish theatre and cultural history, setting up three paradigms. Then the first part is devoted to the historical background and to arguments showing the position of Egypt within the Ottoman

context, questions of citizenship, including renewed Ottoman imperialism in Arab capitals, and the exceptional position of Cairo.

Istanbul as the imperial capital is shown as partly a model of provincial Arab cities, or, if not as a model, as a desired-hated *competitor*. In the transformation of Cairo into a Paris along the Nile, not only Paris, but also Istanbul served as a city where to look. References are numerous in both locations to the other's development. It is in Istanbul that the first large entertainment area in Pera/Beyoğlu was slowly formed, and by 1865 two large theatres – the Italian Naum and the French theatre – with numerous smaller scenes, dominated the social life. In contrast, exactly at this time Khedive Ismāʿīl decided that, instead of private investors, he himself – the state – will take care of Cairo's Azbakiyya square and as a state project, he started to erase and rebuild the scene with four or five theatres. The reconstruction of the process of building a theatre materially in both cities is the topic of my second part, involving questions of ownership, private or state capital, and the question of the new elements in the old built environment.

The third part moves from the buildings to the persons who brought them to life both in an administrative and in a political sense, namely, the individuals who organized troupes to these buildings. The theatres both in Istanbul and Cairo lacked permanent actors, singers, or orchestras until the 1890s. They were designed and conceived as *host* institutions, either in state or in private ownership. The impresarios were the persons who either as businessmen organized a troupe from France or Italy or from Greece to the new buildings, or as Arab or Ottoman Armenian impresarios brought their own troupes to Cairo or Istanbul. This traffic resulted from the 1880s in a wider Mediterranean circulation of people, songs, tastes, languages, and theatre. Reconstructing the lives of four personalities – Paul Draneht, Seraphin Manasse, Sulaymān Qardāʿī and Séropé Benglian – I argue that they demonstrate a non-state initiated, civil involvement in social change, and also that via their lives late Ottoman cities were incorporated into world-

wide entertainment. They also represented four distinct propositions for “culture,” four answers for how to be successful via public education and good taste.

The next part deals with the production of musical plays in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish between 1867 and 1892 via exploring the troubles of an Egyptian singer, □ijāzī, and an Ottoman Armenian composer, Tschouhadjian, and via the description of the main characteristics of the performances. These embody the different types of “culture” organized, conceptualized, and produced by the impresarios in the previous part. The famous Egyptian singer-actor, Salāma □ijāzī, exemplifies the creation of a patriotic star who, in the roles of Arab heroes, embodied political messages but also is a blueprint for later 20th century Egyptian stardom. In contrast, the Ottoman Armenian composer, Dikran Tchouhadjian’s works and life represent the depoliticization of theatre in Istanbul. The survey of musical plays and their performances demonstrate the various methods by which original works of art were produced mixing different traditions. I argue that Arabic theatre via employing music followed previous Arab entertainment conventions, □*arab*, while Ottoman operettas represent a branch of Western European music fashions.

These performances took place mostly in the theatre buildings that offered convenient locations for the central authorities to interfere and use publicity in a number of ways. In my last, fifth part, I deal with the explicit political aspects involving representation, control, and the education of audiences. I show sovereigns (the Sultan and the Khedive) exploiting theatres to represent themselves to their people, to the Europeans, and to each other in a sometimes bitter competition of public ceremonies. Later, in Istanbul Abdülhamid II. did not use public theatres for ceremonies of power, while in Cairo, due to the British occupation, the Opera House became the main scene of Egyptian khedivial sovereignty. I inquire also about the increased control in the music theatres, the state collecting information about the audiences and the censorship of the content of the plays.

All cultural brokers were concerned with the audience, thus my final chapter is devoted to a survey of the audience, the ways they were organized and informed about performances, the money they had to spend, the ways the press described their emotions. In connection with literary and charity societies, I also ask whether audiences possessed extra-theatrical collectivities, if they were involved in political or other ideologies and how they were conceived by the theatre-makers.

Ultimately, my work explains an important underground current of the social and cultural transformation of the late Ottoman Empire, a pre-phase of nationalism. The late Ottoman imperial structure makes this possible that is not yet a post-imperial condition or colonial limbo but also no more hegemonic. Apart from presenting new material and establishing hitherto unknown relations between Cairo and Istanbul, this dissertation showed the making of music theatre as a competition. This competition pertained to much more than access to state resources. It was for the audiences. It comprised visions about possible ways of being civilized, various solutions of how to cope with worldwide fashions and cultural hegemonies, possibilities of self- and public education, cultural images in the public space, business and money, loyalty and resistance, collectivity and class. Ultimately it is in this competition that the power brokers in Cairo and Istanbul redefined their responsibilities and the means what a new state should provide for its citizens. The garden was expected to bring mellow fruits.

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Areas of Research Interest:

- History of the Modern Middle East
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- History of Arab Theatre
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Education:

2007 to 2011 CEU Budapest, Hungary

PhD program in Comparative History

Ph.D. Dissertation: *“A garden with mellow fruits of refinement” - Music Theatres and Cultural Politics in Cairo and Istanbul, 1867-1892*

September 2008 Agha Khan/Wiko International Summer Academy, Istanbul

2007 CEU Budapest, Hungary

MA (with distinction) in History

2005 ELTE, Budapest, Hungary

MA in Arabic and Semitic Philology

2004 ELTE, Budapest, Hungary,

MA in Philosophy of Art

Professional & Research experience:

2008 to 2012 Research fellow, project *“Europe and Beyond. Transfers, Networks and Markets for Musical Theatre in Modern Europe, 1740-1960”* EUI, Florence

2010-2011 Participant, *De la collection aux archives: prises en faux*, EHESS/CNRS.

2007-2011 Assistant Editor, *European Review of History* (Routledge)

2007-2009 Arabic language teaching, CEU, Mediaeval Studies

Awards:

2010. Award for Advanced Doctoral Students, CEU.
February-June 2010. Doctoral Research Support Grant, CEU.
September-December 2009. Erasmus PhD Exchange (CEU-Boğaziçi University).
June-July 2009. Short PhD Research Grant, CEU.
January-March 2009. Research grant, Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Education.
2009. The Academic Achievement Award for First-Year Doctoral Student, CEU.
2006/2008. Scholarship “Ernö Kállai”, Hungarian Ministry of Cultural Heritage.
2003/2004. Scholarship of the Republic for Academic Excellence, Hungarian Ministry of Education.

Selected Publications:

“Arabic Lexicography And European Aesthetics: The Origin Of *Fann*,” *Muqarnas*, 2011, in print.

„From Private Entertainment to Public Education: Opera in the late Ottoman Empire,” in *Oper und Geschichte* (eds. Oliver Müller, Philipp Ther, Jutta Toelle) (Wien: Oldenburg Verlag, 2010), 263-276.

“The ethics of knowledge: Religio Academici reconsidered,” in *Religio Academici* (eds. Andras Szigeti, Peter Losonczi) (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2009), 215-239.

Conferences and Workshops:

1-2 March 2011. Participant in the seminar “Manipuler, accommoder, ranger. Catalogues, inventaires et bases de données,” EHESS, Paris (in French).
17-19 December 2010. “Ubira al-Qahira: min mu’assasa khidiwiyya ila mu’assasa ‘amma” The Archive and the Modern Polity, National Archives of Egypt, Cairo (in Arabic).
18-21 November 2010. “The Nightingale of the Nation: the entanglements of ‘Abduh al-Hamuli,” MESA, San Diego.
19 November 2010. “The Palace And The Public Theatres in 19th Century Istanbul” Kulturpolitik und Theater in europäischen Imperien, University of Vienna, Vienna.
29-31 October 2009. “‘Turkish’ visiting theatre troupes in Egypt (1880s),” Musical societies and politics: Ottoman and early Republican Turkey in its European Context Boğaziçi University/EUI, Istanbul.
3-5 July 2008. “Comparative Cultural History of Empires: Political Aesthetics in Ottoman and Habsburg Contexts,” Empires and Nations, Science Po, Paris.

Languages:

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- Ottoman Turkish (intermediate)