The Khadivial Opera House

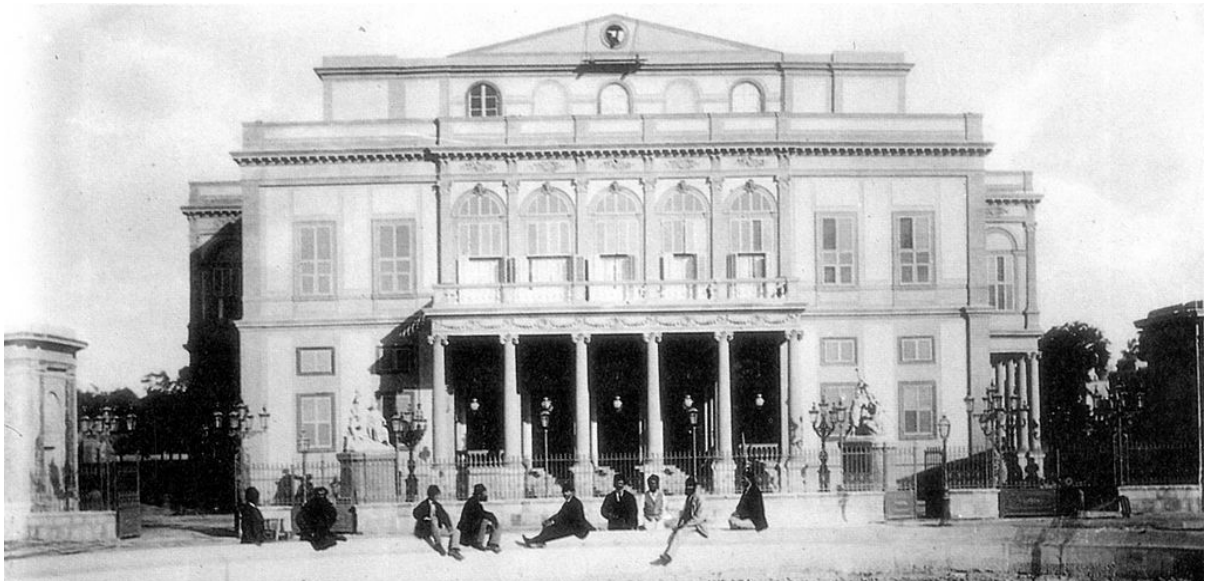
Farida Fahmy, April 2015

The Khadivial Opera House was built as part of the celebrations on the occasion of the inauguration of the opening of the Suez Canal. It was a part of Khedive Ismail's plan to modernize Cairo and transform Egypt into a modern and independent country. The Italian architect Pietro Avoscani was commissioned to design and build the Opera House. It is said that it was a replica of *La Scala Teatro* of Milan. Built hastily in six months, it was predominantly made of wood with a capacity of 850 seats. Verdi's world famous *Rigaletto* was presented on the opening night on November 1868 to Monarchs, nobility and dignitaries from all over the world. Verdi's masterpiece *Aida*, with its passionate music and powerful drama had its world premier on the 24th of December 1871 in the Khadievial Opera house. The national anthem of Egypt's was also composed by Verdi, but was changed after the revolution in 1952.

For nearly over a century the Opera House invited famous international musicians, actors, and opera companies. Prestigious drama companies such as *les comédies Française* and the *Italian Opera Company* gave seasonal appearances, while other companies such as the famous Russian *Moiseyev Dance Ensemble* paid return visits. Prominent Egyptian actors performed Egyptian dramas as well as, popular foreign dramas translated into Arabic. In its latter years the Opera invited American musicals such as *Porgy and Bess* and the famous singer *Josephine Baker* as well as the Russian *Bolshoi* and *Kiev* ballet ensembles. Over time, the name Khadivial Opera became the Royal Opera House and in1952 after King Farouk was deposed, was named simply The Opera House "Dar el Opera".

The Opera House and What It meant To Me

The first time I went to the Opera house I was around thirteen years old. It was both an exiting and frustrating experience. I don't remember how my sister and I managed to get tickets for a performance of the *Marque de Cuevas Ballet Ensemble*. We were filled with excitement and anticipation as we entered the beautiful and regal interior of the opera. We were directed towards the stairs and began climbing until we reached the third floor, which was the last tier of balconies. Although we found our seats on the first row, they were at the very end of the row, right next to the wall of the stage. That evening we watched half a performance, not sequentially, that is, we did not miss the first half of the performance or leave before it ended. We actually saw physically half the performance. As the auditorium of the Opera was horse- shoe shaped, and because where we were seated, our line of vision only allowed us to see a little bit more than half of the of the stage proper. Throughout the performance the dancers would appear, then disappeared then appear again. Throughout the performance we twisted our necks and leaned precariously forward over the banister as we watched the performance. On our way home, we were not angry but were perplexed, as we were raised to understand that it was a privilege to go to the Opera in the first place. In the years that followed we managed to go to the Opera numerous times, but with better seats. Little did I realize at the time, that I would, in the future, actually perform on the stage of this historical theatre.



Dancing In The Opera House

In the 1960s the Reda Troupe gained popularity in both Egypt and abroad. I was in my twenties and a star dancer of a troupe that was comprised of more than 120 artists including a full-fledged orchestra. Besides the Troupe's tours abroad, we began to have seasonal performances in the Opera house. Lo and behold, here I was dancing in the same theater that for nearly a century had hosted prominent and world-renowned artists who graced its stage. To this day, I can remember my changing room with its lush red velvet chairs and its gilded framed mirrors. I can recall the smell of old wood grease paint as I stood in the wings.

The highlight of performing in the Opera was the command performances that we presented for President Nasser and his royal and presidential guests. The most memorable of these performances and what was a great source of pride and a double honor to all of us, was when we danced at the same night and on the same stage with the great Egyptian singer Um Kolthsoum.

Sadly and suspiciously on the morning of the 28th of October 1971 the Opera house was quickly consumed by fire. Along with the building, a century's accumulation of precious artifacts, costumes and a large musical archive that included the hand written composition notes of Verdi's world famous Aida. Many of those attached to the Opera along with artists and art critics believed that the fire was deliberate. Needless to say I was heart broken. A great symbol of the fine arts had gone up in flames marking the end of an era.

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