

EVENTS

MUSIC

Neobyrd & Hady Tarek
Electronic virtuosos NEOBYRD and Hady Tarek will be collaborating together on a performance due to popular demand for their combined music.
Cairo Jazz Club
197, 26th of July St., Agouza, Cairo
Tel: (02) 3345 9939
10 pm

PERFORMANCE

Oscar
Opera group "Oscar" will perform a theatrical production as penned by Alaa Hassan.
Sawy Culture Wheel
Wisdom Hall
26th of July St., Zamalek, Cairo
Tel: (02) 2736 8881
7 pm

EXHIBITIONS

Resistance
To commemorate the third anniversary of Darb 17 18, a group exhibition showing the works of Egyptian artists Karim Keizer, Karim El Tobgy, Moataz Nasreldin and Gamal Ezz in addition to Saudi Arabian artist Faisal Samra and Iraqi artist Adel Abdin will be showing.
Darb 17 18
El Fustat, Old Cairo
Cairo, Egypt
Telephone: (02) 2361 0511

Twenty Something
A group exhibit of works, paintings and sculptures by artists Alaa Abdel Hamid, Maged Mekhalil and Kamal El Feke.
Khan El Maghraby
18 El Mansour Mohamed St., Zamalek, Cairo
Tel: (02) 2735 3349
10:30 am - 9 pm

Collage: 100 Years On
Celebrating one hundred years since the introduction of the medium of collage by Picasso and Braque, a new art gallery located in furniture store Le Souk will be hosting works done in collage by Egyptian artists Huda Lutfi, Hisham El Zeiny and Hany Rashed. The exhibit highlights the artists' various approaches to the medium of collage.
The Gallery, Le Souk
6 Salah El Din St., Zamalek, Cairo
Tel: (02) 2736 5772

Once Upon a Time
Award winning illustrator Helmi El Touni will be presenting a new exhibit of his latest works. Known for his caricature-like style and nationalistic themes, El Touni's work is contemporary and yet a nod to some elements of the past.
Picasso Gallery
30 Hassan Assem St., Zamalek, Cairo
Tel: (02) 2736 7544

Hydrarchy: Transitional and Transformative Seas
An exhibition on the expanse of the sea and the geopolitical role it is currently playing as produced by multiple artists, the exhibition is an interesting commentary on man's contemporary economic relationship to the sea. Works range from conceptual pieces to paintings.
Contemporary Image Collective
22 Abdel Khalek Tharwat St., Fourth Floor
Downtown, Cairo
Tel: (02) 2792 4080

Visit www.thedailynewsegypt.com for the full agenda.

Mahfouz literary award given to the January uprising

By Maurice Chamham
Daily News Egypt

For the past fourteen years, the American University in Cairo Press has given the Naguib Mahfouz medal, named for Egypt's most internationally known novelist, to a younger talent to "recognize an outstanding contribution to Arabic writing."

This year, which is also the 100th anniversary of Mahfouz's birth, the AUC Press instead decided to give the award to the "revolutionary literary creativity of the Egyptian people during the popular uprising that began on 25 January 2011."

"In recognition of the new-found freedom of cultural expression that has characterized the popular uprisings in Egypt," announced the judges, "the American University in Cairo will erect a memorial engraving at the entrance of its Tahrir Square Campus as a

permanent record of this historic celebration."

Director of AUC Press Mark Linz explained that the press would be putting LE 100,000 into a translation fund instead of an individual.

The decision to give the award to an idea, rather than a person, fits with a broader trend of recognizing collective action rather than individual achievement in the context of the Arab Spring at the end of the year. Time Magazine recently announced that its "Person of the Year" would be "The Protester." Foreign Policy Magazine, compiling the "Top 100 Global Thinkers" of 2011, handed the number one spot to "The Arab Revolutionaries," a large group including activist Wael Ghonim, writer Alaa Al-Aswany, and political figure Mohamed ElBaradei.

"Poetic," wrote poet Abdel Hamid Taha on Twitter after the Mahfouz award announcement, "but not sure it is productive."

After the award ceremony Sunday night at El-Sawy Culture Wheel in Zamalek, a roundtable discussed the "revolutionary" aspects of Mahfouz's writing. The participants, including former Minister of Culture Emad Abu Ghazi, novelists Hala Al-Badry, Ibrahim Abdel Meguid, Hamdy Al-Gazzar and Bahaa Abdel Meguid, and translator Humphrey Davies, discussed how Mahfouz's works tackled this issue of revolution. Mahfouz was eight years old during the 1919 revolution, and many of his later works reflected the formative experience of watching British rule rise to protest British rule.

Throughout the rest of his life, the participants seemed to agree, Mahfouz consistently sided against violence and unjust regimes, and with the popular classes. Novelist Ibrahim Abdel Meguid, who won the first award in 1996, focused on Mahfouz's hiatus from writing



Mark Linz, AUC Press Director, and Samia Mehrez, holding the Naguib Mahfouz Award Plaque awarded to the Revolutionary Creativity of the Egyptian People.

after the 1952 revolution, and his subsequent reinvention of his style in a more "philosophical" direction.

The Naguib Mahfouz Medal, like most literary awards, has a history full of debate.

According to AUC professor Samia Mehrez, the judges picked novelist Sonallah Ibrahim to accept the first award and he declined with a "discreet and unpublicized refusal." Over the next few years, Mehrez explains

in a 1999 Al Jadid Magazine article, "announcing the name of the winner" had "systematically become a declaration of war within both the Egyptian and Arab cultural fields."

The crux of the problem, she suggested, is the way each winner is open to criticism that he or she is influenced by the West or another non-local tradition. Egypt's literary field must seek both to achieve "recognition" internationally, as well as "define itself" nationally, she wrote, so "this double bind is simply unsolvable."

On Sunday, after the roundtable discussion and before a short concert of songs from Mahfouz film adaptations, attendees watched a short documentary about the award. Due to his old age, Mahfouz was not able to attend the award ceremonies during his lifetime, so he offered comments and met with winners on film.

The film, a celebratory bi-

ography followed by footage of Mahfouz talking to former winners, added gravity to the moment. Where I was unconvinced by the roundtable that Mahfouz's work had anything particularly meaningful to do with the 2011 revolution, I found myself imagining his comments about the award as if they were about contemporary events, a message in a bottle for posterity. "I wish I were with you today on this happy occasion," he says in a slow cadence that makes even simple phrases revelatory.

He thanks the AUC Press for using the award in his name to promote "the translation of the winning novel into English, thus paving the way for its dissemination world-wide."

Tales of the country

By Myriam Ghattas
Special to Daily News Egypt

The Fourth Panorama of the European Film Festival in Cairo concluded recently. Taking place in Cairo it featured a number of documentaries that explored certain facets of Egypt which may have been little known to local audiences though they are highly fascinating and instructive.

From "The Alexandrians" to "Sira: Songs of the Crescent Moon," we travel from the North to the South of Egypt in a mind-boggling examination of two worlds so far apart that it is at times hard to believe that the stories they tell are set in the same country.

These examples and so many more like them serve as a reminder that Egypt has always been a meeting point of various historical currents and cultures and that this very diversity is at the core of the land and of the soul of its people.

Aleksandrinke ("The Alexandrians; 2011) by Metod Pevce tells the saga of the Slovenian girls and women from the Goriska region and Vipava Valley who, starting in the late nineteenth century, flocked to Egypt's Alexandria looking for work to supply their families with much needed earnings, and often ended up becoming household members serving as wet nurses, nannies, maids and governesses. This mass migration phenomenon was so common that the women came to be known in their hometown as The Alexandrians.

Pevce's documentary sheds light on a perhaps somewhat forgotten international current that affected an entire region in Slovenia as well as the inhabitants of the Egyptian northern coastal city and contributed to the upbringing and formation of numerous generations of Alexandrian children.

"The Alexandrians" paints a compelling double-sided image of the children who were raised by the Slovenian women in Alexandria in opposition to those who were left behind in Slovenia while their mothers looked after the strangers' babies. The contrast between the elation of the first and the bitterness of the second is deeply unsettling.

The complexity of the issue goes even deeper. The children who were raised by the Alexandrians were themselves experiencing mixed emotions as they felt rather estranged from their own biological parents while their nannies almost entirely took over the role of parenting.

The last facet of the Alexandrians phenomenon is the Slovenian women themselves, who were, predictably, torn in time between the double lives they were living. While the children in Alexandria were not their own, they were the ones who were familiar to them and with whom they spent the better part of the year.

The Alexandrians' own children and their husbands who awaited them back in Slovenia rarely, if ever, got to see their mothers and wives again. As a result, when Nasser's nationalization efforts caused foreign presence to dwindle in Egypt and it came time for The Alex-

andrians to leave, they had no home to return to.

"The Alexandrians" showcases a fascinating subject in a regrettably messy fashion that makes it oftentimes hard to follow. Although the filmmaker's coverage exhibits multiple facets of the topic in question, the pacing is uneven and the distribution in the final presentation lacks a unifying vision.

That said, the individual interviews, if considered as self-contained stories, are touching and compelling. A few of the surviving Alexandrians, hovering around their centennial years, share some of their memories from the time they worked in Egypt. The children whom they helped look after, now middle-aged or older, recall endearing memories for the most part. Some confess a deep sense of confusion and unease when attempting to sort out their feelings and memories toward their nannies in relation to those that should have naturally flowed toward their own parents. As for the Slovenian children, they display a unanimous range of sadness, resentment and frustration despite their awareness of their mothers' sacrifice.

Pevce's "Aleksandrinke" pays these women their dues, which real life has robbed from them. For better or worse, their story has now found its place and will be preserved in the annals of cinema.

SIRA

"Sira: Wenn Der Halbmond Spricht" ("Sira: Songs of the Crescent Moon"; 2011) is a Swiss production, the result of a collaboration between Aswan native Ahmed Abdel Mohsen and Swiss-born Sandra Gysi who spent many years in Egypt studying Arabic.

The documentary captures a slice of time in the life of Sayed El-Dawwy, the aging interpreter in a long-standing line of the tradition of Sira storytelling and possibly its very last one.

The documentary modestly opens and closes in a neighboring village of Qus, a rural town of southern Egypt, where 80-year-old El-Dawwy lives and exercises his craft of Sira storytelling accompanied by his troupe of backup singers and musicians. We sense the excitement mounting as the locals of the town gather in front of the stage at night, reclining in their chairs and sipping their teas, while listening to stories full of heroic feats, tragedies, loss and occasionally love.

They laugh, they cry, they applaud. El-Dawwy knows how to keep the flow of his recitation going and rarely misses a beat, an essential quality of the Sira interpreter.

Sira is the Arabian world's most significant epic poem, narrating the story of the desert people of Bani Hilal and of their hero Abu Zaid. It is comprised of a staggering five million verses, the entirety of which now solely and exclusively reside in El-Dawwy's mind. For Sira is more than just a classic tale of epic proportions. Its tradition involves its transmission by word of mouth down the family tree, from father to son.

Thus El-Dawwy, who has never learned to read or write a word in his life, becomes the human vehicle that lives and breathes this poem and can improvise the stories whilst performing at a moment's notice. The



A group photo of some of the Alexandrians: a group of Slovenian women who worked in the homes of Alexandrian families, featuring in a documentary about the conflict of being mothers away from their own children back home.

interpreter's existence revolves around his travels between the towns of southern Egypt, night after night enthralling dedicated and appreciative audiences.

In contrast to the elder El-Dawwy, meet his 27-year-old grandson, Ramadan El-Dawwy, who feels the pressure of his heritage for having to carry on the tradition that was handed down to him from his ancestors. The film highlights the growing tension between old and new as we sense Ramadan's desire to be involved in more modern activities or at least more contemporary singing forms like pop singer Mounir's upbeat rendition of a modernized version of the Sira.

Ramon Orza, a composer, was given the tricky task of scoring this film. When asked about the reason behind the

choice of an electro-pop acoustic soundtrack, Abdel Mohsen elaborated on the process, "The most difficult thing about a film that contains music is to add a soundtrack to it. Our solution was that we hired a composer from the very beginning, from the start of research. The composer was Swiss-Spanish and lived with Al-Dawwy and his troupe for three years listening to them and doing research to try and maintain an oriental theme. But to make an oriental soundtrack to accompany the music of the Sira would have caused them to compete and (the two musical trends) were not going together. It was necessary for the soundtrack to be different from the traditional music."

According to the film's official website, the UNESCO, which declared the Sira as an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), explained its patronage of the project thus: "Finally, the Hilali epic is still considered to be the most important epic in the Arabian world

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