



THE CAIRO REVIEW INTERVIEW

TELEVISIONING EGYPT'S HISTORY

Egyptian screenwriter Waheed Hamed discusses the state of Egyptian cinema, Islamism in his work, and the shrinking space for creativity in Egypt

Waheed Hamed is a self-proclaimed anti-radical. The widely acclaimed screenwriter has focused his five-decade career almost entirely on fighting the rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism in Egypt. In June 2017, the second season of the television serial *Al-Gamaa* (“The Brotherhood”)—which traces the evolution of the Muslim Brotherhood from the death of its founder Hassan El-Banna through the late 1960s—ignited controversy for portraying Gamal Abdel Nasser as a member of the now-banned Islamist group. Rather, Hamed’s true intentions, he clarified in a beleaguered TV appearance, were to denounce the Brotherhood’s actions and reveal “the truth about them and the poison they injected in society.”

Raised in Sharqiya, Lower Egypt, Hamed, 74, is the son of illiterate farmers. He started writing short stories in 1960s Cairo before switching to radio dramas upon the advice of novelist Yusuf Idris, who took notice of Hamed’s dramatic flair. His cinematic career took off shortly after one of his radio dramas highlighting Egypt’s flawed criminal justice system, *Sad Night Bird*, was turned into a hit movie. Since then, he has written more than seventy films, TV serials, radio dramas, and plays. His 1992 black comedy *Terrorism and Kebab* became a cultural landmark of the Mubarak era, portraying one man’s hapless battle against Egypt’s corrupt bureaucracy and poking fun at the government’s inability to deal with terrorism. His controversial works have made Hamed the target of criticism, lawsuits, and even personal threats. Today, Hamed is in the constant company of a personal bodyguard.

Cairo Review Associate Editor **Nadeen Shaker** interviewed Hamed at the Grand Nile Tower Hotel in downtown Cairo on September 11, 2017.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Are your television dramas a political project?*

WAHEED HAMED: They’re a societal project first. That’s their origins. Some serials aimed to combat terrorism, which is a societal question anyway. Where is terrorism? Just today

◀ Waheed Hamed,
Cairo, Sept. 11, 2017.
Nadeen Shaker for
the Cairo Review

all the newspapers were talking about nine [terrorists] in Imbaba. There's penetration into society, and after all the aim of TV drama isn't to address terrorists, but to address the people, to make them aware of this danger. I'm [targeting] the entire Egyptian mentality, alerting it, and saying, "Listen everyone, there's danger. There are people whose minds are closed. Not just that, they want to impose their sway." What does it mean to set up the Islamic caliphate? Is there an Islamic caliphate? Was it such a great thing? When you look into the history of the caliphate from Muawiya onwards, you'll find just one small exception like Omar Abdel-Aziz. If we bothered to read history properly, we'd discover the debauchery, cruelty, and abandon of the caliphs. Take the caliph, I don't want to get his name wrong, who had four thousand slave girls. Madness!

CAIRO REVIEW: *Can you tell us about your move to Cairo in the 1960s?*

WAHEED HAMED: Well, I left the village and the towns of the countryside, and I knew nothing other than the village and the local administrative center, Menya Al-Qamh, and Zagazig, the provincial capital. That was my relation with cities. While I was living in Zagazig for secondary school, I would come to Cairo as a visitor. I'd either go to the Story Club, which was on Qasr Al-Aini Street, or to the 23rd of July celebrations and hear the speech by President Abdel Nasser. They helped make it easy to attend by making the train free and we, as country folk, longed to come to the bright lights of Cairo anyway.

I carried on writing short stories and frequenting the Story Club and things like that. I found out where Naguib Mahfouz's salon was held and I started attending. I sat at the back. I was still a *fallah* (a farmer), and even till today, despite my age, close friends still shout out to me "*ya fallah*," meaning that lots of things about me haven't changed. From the salon I learned, and I went assiduously. Naguib Mahfouz, God rest his soul, was a very courteous man. He never embarrassed anyone at all, but helped and encouraged others. He would ask us youngsters, "What are you up to?" To those who said they wrote short stories he would say, "Okay, bring a story next Friday and we'll have a look."

The group included Gamal Al-Ghitani, Ahmed Hashim Al-Sharif, the critic Abdel-Rahman Ouf, and Ezzat Awwad, and the idea kept growing in my head. I heard a really important thing from Naguib Mahfouz in this context. He said, "If I had known I would be a writer,"—he was a graduate of the Faculty of Arts, but I'm not sure which department—"I would have studied literature." So I thought, "No I've got to study literature." I headed off and studied it and joined the faculty. If my family had known what I had done . . .

CAIRO REVIEW: *How did you get into cinema?*

WAHEED HAMED: At that time, and in parallel, I had started my activity as a short story writer. When my first collection came out, the head of the Book Organization was the late poet Salah Abdel Sabbour, it came out as part of a new series of young writers. The critics took a great deal of interest in the series of new books and I saw that each new short story collection was celebrated. My book was largely ignored and came at the end and there wasn't much interest. Even the late critic Farouk Abdel-Qader attacked it and said it was rubbish.

I had given it to Dr. Yusuf Idris. I saw him out having lunch, and I thought I'll go and ask him what he thought. He greeted me and asked me to sit down and have something to drink in a very friendly way. But he didn't mention the short story collection. He didn't say it was good or bad. He said, "Look behind you." I was sitting there and turned round. He said, "What can you see?" I said, "Nothing, just a television." He said, "That's the place for you. You have a real sense for drama." So I moved into radio drama and wrote for the radio. I made some really famous series until *Sad Night Bird*, which caused a real sensation on the radio. After the seventh episode, a cinema producer came and said that they wanted to buy the story of the serial from me to turn into a film and that they would get a scriptwriter.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How did cinema change in the Nasser period, particularly after the nationalization of the film industry?*

WAHEED HAMED: The cinema flourished in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. We were making up to eighty films a year. Not all of them were good, but—the Public Cinema Organization made some very good films, serious films. During that period in general, the film movement and the cultural movement in general was flourishing. In the 1960s, the slogan of the Ministry of Culture was "A book every six hours." If you walked on Emadeddine Street, the theaters were all lit up: Al-Hakim, Al-Hadith, and Al-Gayb. It was a big thing.

The culture started to come under siege at the beginning of the 1970s, from the early days of Sadat and the start of the spread of the Islamist current, which Anwar Sadat cultivated. With the spread of the Islamist current, there was a contraction. A war began. We began hearing that cinema was forbidden. That's to put it very briefly. Are you familiar with the theory of opposite reactions? In an atmosphere of strict puritanism, the cinema took on another form. Something called contract films emerged, purely commercial. The funding came from Saudi Arabia, which had no cinemas, so why was it funding films? To distribute them on videotapes to Saudi Arabia for sale. So the funding came from there. Cheap films were made, of course to Saudi taste, entertainment and comedy. But the source was . . . not from here. Cheap productions

have their market and those films and that period had an effect on the mentality of viewers, damaging it.

CAIRO REVIEW: *When did terrorism and Islamic radicalism become a major theme in Egyptian films?*

WAHEED HAMED: True cinema draws its subjects from society. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s you find most films dealt with two issues: either the issue of housing, the housing crisis facing people, or the issue of drugs. When terrorism came along, it imposed itself, and the cinema had to address this new problem. Those who say that such works were the result of directives from the state are big liars who know nothing. Rather, I affirm that such films resulted from the real desire of their makers, whether writers, directors, or even producers. Nobody came and said to me that I should write the films *Birds of Darkness* or *Terrorism and Kebab*, or a film like *Blood of the Deer*, all of which are against terrorism, or the serials *The Family* or *Al-Gamaa* [The Brotherhood]. No one ordered me to do those things. It was me who wrote and found a producer.

I want to say something very important. Any artistic work that is not written according to your conscience and what's inside you, I mean anything made according to instructions won't succeed. Even if someone comes and says, "Write a song for the president," it will fade away, whatever it is. Where are those songs? They've gone. Look at all the songs produced about Gamal Abdel Nasser or Sadat or Hosni Mubarak, or even El-Sisi. Don't they all disappear? After some time they die, because they're fake. But something from your heart, from your awareness, something that comes out of the social environment, that's what can have an influence on people.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How do you see Egyptian cinema after the 2011 revolution?*

WAHEED HAMED: Cinema currently is in an extremely weak condition. There are films, but cheap films, so we only celebrate a small number of good, or even so-so films, and really celebrate them. Let's take this year's cinematic output. [There are] five or six films, and the rest are violent movies, action, cheap comedies or dance movies. Cinematic production rests on a neighborhood, a dancer, and a petty squabble. That's not good enough.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Why is that?*

WAHEED HAMED: Corruption of public taste and the cheapening of the culture, that's all. If you put out rotten products, you'll find those who buy them and accept them. Serious works, nobody . . .

CAIRO REVIEW: *What was the impact of Gulf money and tastes on film production in Egypt?*

WAHEED HAMED: First, it's been a tragedy, because Gulf society was funding, and therefore imposing its conditions. For example the slogan "Clean Cinema." What does that mean? No kissing, nothing, you know. Not censorship, but you are making a film for a specific viewer according to the taste of the financial backer. What was the result? That's a major reason why the Gulf as a whole has imposed its culture on us. And we listened and obeyed, and that damaged Egyptian society. I did not have enough freedom, not the kind of freedom where it's the state that prevents me, no it was the producer himself. I remember once that a Gulf producer met with four writers, me and Bashir Al-Deek, and the late Muhsin Zayid and the late Osama Anwar Okasha. He asked us that when we wrote, if a character had a problem we shouldn't have him go to some dive bar and get drunk as was usual in films, but he should go to the mosque and pray. Stuff like that. We had directives.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Let's talk about another form of interference, like the interference of censorship in the film The Innocent Man.*

WAHEED HAMED: Now that's another story. The censorship system is innocent, as innocent as the wolf was of Joseph's blood! The censor cleared the film in its entirety without a single cut. Then we had a private view. Lots of people were invited. One of them was an official, a second- or third-tier official with ambitions. When he saw the film, the ending had Ahmed Zaki, the innocent man, opening fire on the tyrannical people and he says one line: "What an idea! Every soldier has a rifle in his hands. What would happen if they opened fire on everyone?" Then we saw Military Intelligence come over. In those days there were two important people: the director and the writer, that is Waheed Hamed and Atef Al-Tayyeb, and the matter caused a big commotion.

But there was a weak party. That weak and devious party was the producer, who was worried about his money. The film might get banned or whatever. It was decided that the film had to be seen by four ministers. Who? Four heavyweight ministers, the late Abu Ghazala, the late Ahmed Rushdi, the minister of culture, Ahmed Heikal, and I don't remember the fourth. Of course because of their status, they were the ones who set the date. They said we'll see the film at the studio on Tuesday all together. So we were waiting for them to come and watch the film and then for us to discuss it, the director, the writer, and those with the power to decide. They decided when to come, except the producer had told us they were coming on Wednesday. I was sitting with Atef Al-Tayyeb and we were working out how to confront those big shots when all the while they were watching.

So we were tricked. But the producer carried out an even bigger crime of his own devising. Before the ministers turned up, he took the film and cut out all you could imagine. Even, say, when [actor] Ahmed Zaki wonders how a kilo of apples can cost 25 piasters. He removed it. He turned the film into . . . We had nothing to do with it. Plus, when Abu Ghazala saw the film, he asked why they had bothered to bring them in to see it. So the deception was by the producer. Censorship had nothing to do with it.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Was it self-censorship then?*

WAHEED HAMED: From the producer, worried about his money. He'd spent a lot on the film and if it was banned, it would be a massive loss. I'd like to complete answering the question. I personally did not have run-ins with the censor, because I understood the censorship laws very well.

CAIRO REVIEW: *When did your interest in writing about extremism and terrorism begin? Was there a turning point?*

WAHEED HAMED: No, it was my human and patriotic sense. I saw there was a problem that everyone was scared to deal with. Terrorism was supposed to be confronted. You raise people's awareness by every means, and I volunteered, it wasn't anything.

CAIRO REVIEW: *When did your interest in writing about those themes start?*

WAHEED HAMED: In the 1990s. By the way, I mean a fact we have to state, nothing is easy. When I wrote the serial *The Family* for TV, they rejected it and told me, "We can't provoke terrorism. Terrorism exists and we don't want to make them angry. We want them to keep quiet. There's no call for goading them." Then when terrorism increased and got worse, they came and asked for the serial. The [state] TV produced it and a repeat just finished last week.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Does your stance against Islamic extremism affect your work?*

WAHEED HAMED: No, look, after *The Family* I had a bodyguard. Permit me to use an expression I saw in an American movie. Having a bodyguard was like someone walking with a monkey on his back. I had bodyguards, but I told them to keep some distance. I wanted my freedom. For example I like to go to the supermarket, but I can't do that with someone covering my back. It would be wrong. You see? But your idea, no. It just made me enemies. All extremists are personal enemies of mine. They use foul language against me, the Muslim Brotherhood and others. Even their vocabulary is vulgar and very rude. That wouldn't come from a true Muslim, because being polite is inherent in Islam.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Did you expect the series Al-Gamaa to cause so much controversy?*

WAHEED HAMED: Ultimately, and as we speak, I'm the winner. The problem is, if you'll allow me, so as not to offend anyone, the rush toward ignorance, nobody reads. When you decide to pass judgment on something, don't base your judgment on the emotions, or zeal, or affiliation. The problem started with whether Gamal Abdel Nasser was Brotherhood or not. More importantly at this moment is that all of them agree that Abdel Nasser was in the Brotherhood. People say he was in the Brotherhood for a bit. Okay, I'm not wrong. The man was in the Brotherhood. Okay, so why did you make such a fuss? If they had been patient, they would have known that the series was fair to Gamal Abdel Nasser and defended him. It portrayed him in a very respectable way. So much so that Abdel Nasser's children, his son, asked for me personally and was very happy. He even called in to a program and went on air. But there are people who like to cause storms. Okay, read carefully. For me to know whether Gamal Abdel Nasser was a Brother, you can't imagine how much effort that takes. He wasn't a Muslim Brother, but there were various testimonies that he'd joined the Brotherhood. [Prime Minister] Ibrahim Abdel Hadi summoned Abdel Nasser to his office to accuse him of being in the Brotherhood and the Army. In the end, there is nothing in *Al-Gamaa*, part two specifically, that isn't true.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Series like Al-Gamaa are historical dramas. Do you rely entirely on research or do you fictionalize events for the plot?*

WAHEED HAMED: No, no you can't. It doesn't matter for the plot. There's only one thing that changes. The dialogue. We didn't hear the conversations, we weren't there. So when Abdel Nasser meets with Al-Hudaibi to discuss something, I don't have the exact dialogue. He said and I said. What's the aim? Do you accept it or not? You're writing it, but I didn't hear them. It's the same with all historical drama, even the history of Islam. Did we live with the non-believers? Did we hear what they said? All of that is a question of writing. But you can't change a fact. It would be over. The proof is something in part two of *Al-Gamaa* which we were very worried about. The torture scenes. We did them and did them explicitly. Some people said that the series was to the benefit of the Brotherhood because of the torture scenes. But you have to give the truth. Otherwise, if you denied it or brushed over it and didn't include it, people wouldn't believe you. Fairness requires it goes both ways.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How can art and cinema flourish in a country like Egypt where freedom of expression is limited by censorship and law?*

WAHEED HAMED: To get to the point, creativity, art, and general culture are closely linked to society. Art will be of high standard when the chaos rife in soci-

ety ends. When society becomes stable and economic life revives, there will be . . . Look, everything is connected. Currently, society is not balanced and the culture has changed. The greater crime committed by the Muslim Brotherhood, which it worked hard for, was to damage the Egyptian personality and take away its particular features. That is the greater crime.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What is your hope for Egypt?*

WAHEED HAMED: I'm now 74 years old and have a heart disease. I say, "Please God, don't let me die before I see this country in a good way." I often sit and think about this carefully. It preoccupies me. Look, death means distance from life. I feel that when I'm in the other world, I'll still be worried about the country. It's like someone dying and leaving behind a young child without anyone to look after them. That's my feeling. I hope to die with my country doing well.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How would you compare Egyptian historical dramas with those produced elsewhere in the Arab World?*

WAHEED HAMED: We have a sense for artistic and dramatic value. We are better in that respect, but in terms of production, they're better because they spend money. Our poor material capabilities make us . . . For example, you need one hundred extras, but you get twenty. You want a palace. I don't want to tell you the trouble I went through to get the president to agree to us filming in Abdeen Palace. . . . If it hadn't been like that, I wouldn't have made the serial. We are affected by the weakness of production, but we could, if these issues . . . We have great artists in terms of writing, directing, and acting, and nothing will stop us.