

# Projecting Egypt on Stage and Screen

## Dr Marlé Hammond

In November 2023, the Friends were in for a special treat: a lecture followed by a reception at the Petrie Museum, attended by the granddaughter of Fatima Rushdi, Monica Janssens. In the lecture, Dr Marlé Hammond from SOAS talked to us about an unusual but interesting topic: two pioneers of early 20<sup>th</sup> century stage and cinema, Fatima Rushdi (1908–1996) and Aziz Eid (1881–1942). At the reception afterwards held in the Petrie Museum, readings from the memoirs of Aziza Janssens, the daughter of Fatima Rushdi, provided additional information and colour about the life of one of Egypt's female pioneers of stage and screen.

### A talent spotted

At first glance, Rushdi and Eid were an ill-matched couple with very little in common apart from their passion for the stage. In addition to a considerable age difference, they came from very different backgrounds. Known as the "pioneer of Arab theatre," well-educated Aziz was credited with inventing Egyptian stage direction and introducing the Egyptian vernacular to the theatre, thereby making this art form widely accessible. When they met, Fatima was an illiterate impoverished young girl recently brought to Cairo after her fathers' death on the advice of the famous composer Syed Darwish, who by chance heard her sing in her hometown of Alexandria when she was perhaps 10 years old. He assisted her family's move to the capital and found her work as a music hall singer. However, Fatima was increasingly drawn to acting, and started frequenting coffee shops with the theatre crowd, reportedly announcing her desire to write stage plays before she could read or write. Here, Aziz Eid and writer Mohamed Taymour spotted her potential, and Aziz started educating her to give her a chance. Apart from supporting her literacy, he arranged for her to learn Quran recitation, taught her history, and introduced her to literature and the Egyptian Museum. By this time, ancient Egyptian history had become imbued with national liberation overtones and contributed to a new sense of Egyptian cultural pride.

### Marriage

According to the memoirs of Aziza Janssens (other sources may differ), Fatima's mother pressured Aziz to marry her daughter in order allow her to make her stage debut in the play *The Red Village*, a tale about an exploitative village *Umda* (chief) played by Aziz, who tried to seduce the innocent girl portrayed by Fatima. She was 15 at the time, and in the same year Aziz co-founded the famous *Ramsis* theatre troupe in Cairo with Yousef Wahbi. Fatima joined immediately and became its leading actress by 1925. Originally, the *Ramsis* troupe mainly consisted of students and suffered from a severe shortage of female members. According to Aziza Janssens, Aziz tried to recruit young women in the 1920s by reminding them of their pivotal role in the struggle for early Islam.



*Monica Janssens and Fatima Rushdi  
Mena House Hotel, 1990s*

Fatima was Monica's grandmother. As noted in the report, Monica spoke at the Reception held in the Petrie Museum after the lecture. For a brief, illustrated review of this event, please follow this link:

[Projecting Egypt](#)

### Fatima Rushdi Troupe

Fatima fell out with the *Ramsis* before she reached 20 and set up her own theatre company, the *Fatima Rushdi Troupe*, with Aziz as artistic director, making her only the second woman in modern Egyptian history to do so (Mahdi, 2021, 110). This troupe performed more than 200 plays, and toured both within Egypt and in the Arab world as far as Baghdad, making Fatima one of the most famous actresses there by the early 1930s. A chance encounter with a wealthy sponsor allowed the troupe to use increasingly lavish sets and costumes as well as special effects. For one play, Aziz filled the stage with real sand; for another, he constructed a complete mudbrick fort. Originally, stage sets were painted by foreigners due to a lack of indigenous trained artists, which Aziz resented. Fatima enjoyed taking on male roles, such as that of Mark Antony in an Egyptian version of *Julius Caesar* in 1928. She also played the roles of Tosca and Salambo. Through roles such as these, she became known as the "Sarah Bernhardt of the East."

### Stage, Film and Egyptian identity

Although Egyptian stage and film during the 1920s–1930s worked on establishing an Egyptian identity, many of the plays actually performed were adaptations of European originals, such as a version of *The Taming of the Shrew* translated into colloquial Arabic. One reason was the lack of censorship on European plays, which were not regarded as threatening by the authorities, whereas contemporary Egyptian plays were scrutinised. However, one of her greatest stage hits was *The Death of Cleopatra*, a verse poem written by the renowned Egyptian poet Ahmed Shawqi to enhance Cleopatra's reputation in the wake of the rediscovery of Tutankhamun's tomb. This was set to music by the Egyptian Mohamed el Wahab, who was also part of the cast. Cleopatra was cast as a noble character forever loyal to Anthony and the Egyptians, who ended her life as the ultimate patriotic act. The play was designed to speak to contemporary Egyptians and their struggle against the British Empire. The set designs were inspired by the treasures in the Egyptian Museum and included, for example, temple columns and statues of Isis. Fatima in the leading role caused a sensation by using a live but defanged asp on stage. The play was a hit and praised as anti-colonial by reviewers. Unfortunately, no recording of this play survived; only one of its hit songs was later recorded by Mohamed Abdel Wahab.

### Fatima and Cinema

Although her marriage to Aziz did not last long, Fatima continued working with him until 1933, when she became increasingly interested in cinema and directing. Fatima's cinema career commenced in 1928. She made 15 or 16 films in the years up to 1955, mostly independently of Aziz. Her debut was the 1928 silent melodrama *Tragedy Atop The Pyramid*, where she played a woman whose lover is falsely accused of killing her brother. This was followed by another silent film but neither succeeded to their poor technical quality.



Fatima Rushdi  
Image: Wikipedia

In 1933, one year after the introduction of sound film to Egypt, Fatima, now aged 25, took the plunge to write and direct the sound film *The Marriage (of Salma)*, which told the story of a poor lower-class woman forced by her father to marry a man she does not love. She ends her life by throwing herself under a car. The film was shot in Spain, and Fatima played the tragic female lead. She was so unhappy with the finished product that she reportedly destroyed all copies of it, and did not direct or script-write again. However, she produced several films, and starred in many more. The film that made her famous was *Determination* (1939), directed by Kamel Salim, to whom she was briefly married. In this, she played a young working-class girl who falls in love with and marries a neighbour's son, an educated young man from a modest background who then promptly falls on hard times. This film paints a vivid picture of the economic crisis that ravaged Egypt in the 1930s and is now considered one of the great works of early Egyptian cinema, inaugurating an influential form of neo-realistic filmmaking that focused on the life of ordinary people.

### Remarkable Achievement

Without a doubt, both Fatima Rushdi and Aziz Eid played key roles in the development of early Egyptian theatre and cinema, and significantly influenced the popular culture of their time. Fatima always credited Aziz with the invaluable assistance he gave her in launching her career. However, I am amazed at the ability and boldness of this young, illiterate Alexandrine girl who seemed to know what she wanted at a very early age and who managed to achieve her goals against formidable odds in a society not sympathetic to strong-willed, independent women.

Marlé Hammond's lecture also gave us a glimpse of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Egyptian culture, and how it was impacted by the rediscovery of the Egyptian past at a time of national awakening.

Report by **Birgit Schoer**

Editor's note: much of the report is based directly on the lecture but Birgit has added additional points taken from:

Mahdi, T.M., 2021. *Class, Gender, and Nationalism in 'Aziza Amir and Fatma Rushdie's Films*. MA thesis, University of Toronto.

Rushdi, F., 1951. *I Like Men's Roles*. [Web] Alex Cinema reprint from *El Kawakeb*, **25**, February 1951. Available from:

[https://www.bibalex.org/alexcinema/articles/Fatma\\_Roushdi.html](https://www.bibalex.org/alexcinema/articles/Fatma_Roushdi.html)