Salah Abdel Sabour

Leila and the Madman

Summary

The play's action unfolds directly before and during the burning of large parts of Cairo on 26 January 1952. A group of very young, very inexperienced left-wing radicals, who, rather than engage directly in the kind of revolutionary acts of which they dream, have gathered around an elderly left-wing intellectual editor to produce an oppositional newspaper. They are disappointed to find, however, that even here they are unable to voice their true opinions, due to unrelenting censorship.

Hossam, a member of the group who had briefly courted the attractive and vivacious Leila, is in prison for political offences, and the editor's latest newspaper article has failed to gain the censors' approval. Nevertheless he has managed to keep up his spirits and presents the group with a new idea. They should form an acting troupe and the play they finally settle on, which they immediately begin to rehearse, is, Shawqi's Majnoun Leila. The editor insists that Said, a young man who joined the group following Hossam's arrest, play the lead opposite Leila. Over the course of the rehearsals, the two aspiring young militants, fall in love.

It is Said's black memories of his painful experience of poverty and his witnessing the sexual aggression to which his mother was subjected while he was a child—that prevents him from expressing his love for Leila. Ziyad, another member of the group, discovers that Hossam, in a desire for ease and a comfortable life, has sold out to the authorities and has informed them about the group's activities.

Hassan announces his determination to kill Hossam, Hossam escapes. The following morning Cairo begins to burn. All three young men who visit Hossam on that fateful night end up in prison. When Leila visits Said in prison, she finds him detached and unkempt, his conversation incoherent and nonsensical. Like Qais in the classical story, Said has gone mad. 1