

**WAE SHAWKY
DRAMA 1882**

Drama 1882 has been realized for the Egyptian Pavilion at the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia



Curator and Artist:

Wael Shawky

Produced by:

Mass Alexandria



Written, Directed, and Original Score:

Wael Shawky

This exhibition was supported by:

LISSON GALLERY



BARAKATCONTEMPORARY

صيفير زملر غاليري
SFEIR-SEMLER GALLERY

Commissioner:

Ministry of Culture, Egypt
Accademia d'Egitto a Roma

This exhibition was made possible by:

Bishoy Azmy & Mary Habib
Riad Armanious & Natalie Ashba
Mai Eldib
Masha & Shihab Shobokshi
Mounir Nakhla & Ingy Magar

Scientific Partners:

Andrea Viliani
Sebastien Delot
Yasmine El Rashidi

Table of Contents

- I.** Prelude
- II.** Much older, still here...
- III.** Projective Imagination
- IV.** Chronicles
- V.** About Wael Shawky
- VI.** Credits
- VII.** Acknowledgments

Andrea Viliani
Sebastian Delot
Yasmine El Rashidi

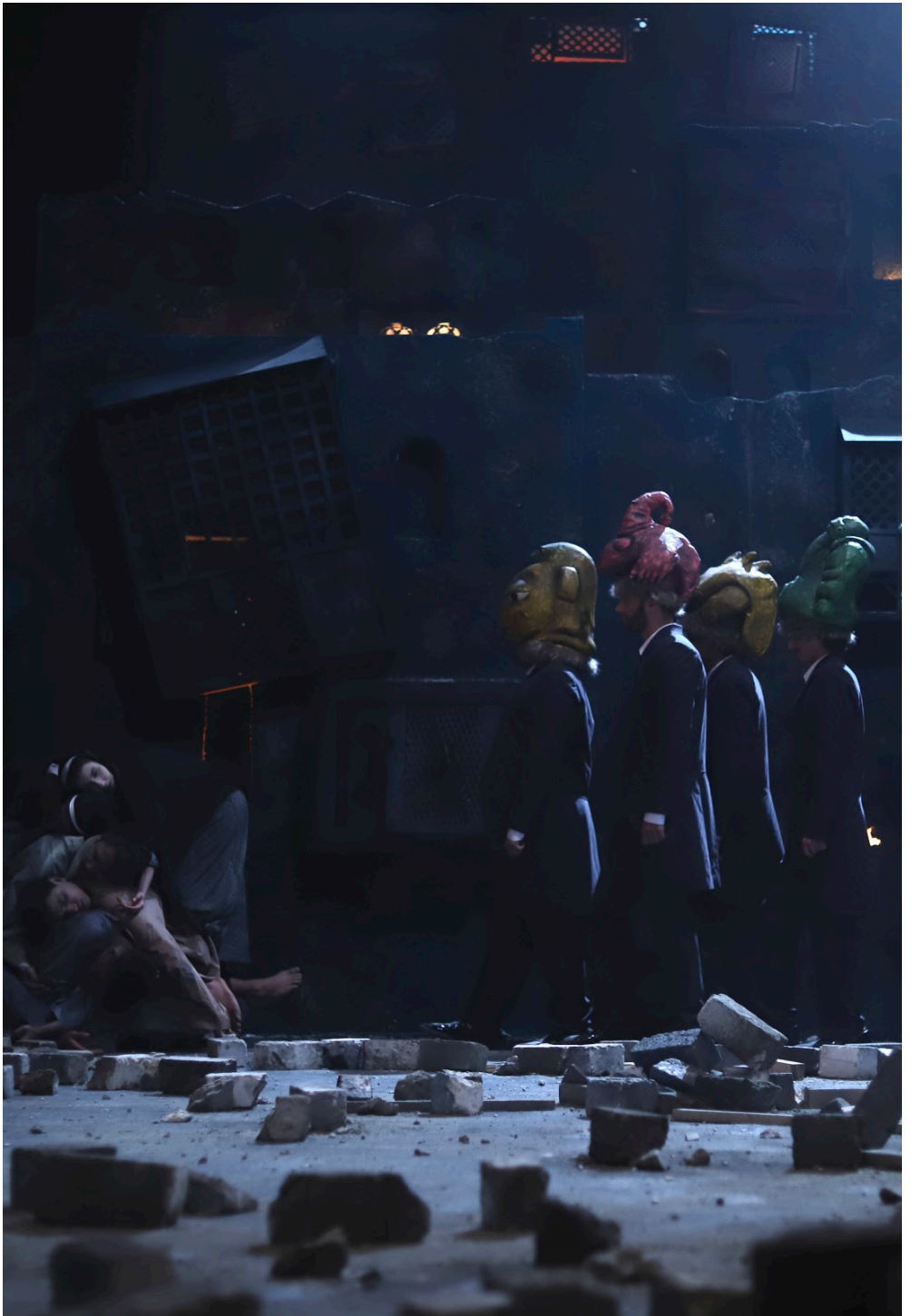
Prelude

For more than three decades, the Alexandrian-born artist Wael Shawky has blurred and redefined boundaries between film, performance, sculpture and installation through works that intervene in the gaps of the mostly widely-held historical accounts of the culture and history of Arab world. His multi-layered films and installations entail intricate hand-made sets and period costumes, as well as puppets, marionettes, and both trained and untrained actors, including children. Set alongside sculptures and drawings, his work immerses rigorously-researched accounts of history into worlds of his own creation. This mix of truth and fiction posits his practice. He premises history to be a record of subjectively depicted sequences rather than indisputable facts. Through elaborate reconstructions of historic events, Shawky re-evaluates and raises questions about the ambiguities of chronicled documents of record, and the authority of written history.

Created for the Egyptian Pavilion on the occasion of the 60th edition of the International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, *Drama 1882* continues this practice of historical renditions. The eight-part, operatic film considers Egypt's nationalist Urabi revolution against imperial rule (1879-1882). Led by Colonel Ahmed Urabi, who climbed military ranks from peasant hood to eventually found the Egyptian Nationalist Party, Urabi campaigned to secure Egypt for the Egyptians. But what

exactly happened in 1882 to implode his popular movement and precipitate the full-scale bombardment of Alexandria by British forces and his subsequent exile? Through a rigorous inquiry into the historical minutiae, *Drama 1882* recasts the narrative lens on the summer of 1882, when a café-fight between an Egyptian donkey-keeper and a Maltese, erupted into riots that left 300 people dead and the city a site of devastation. Was the fight extemporaneous, or rather pre-meditated by the British to justify their subsequent attack?

Filmed in a historic theatre in Alexandria, and staged to the backdrop of striking, painterly sets, Shawky precisely directs his cast to a mesmerizing musical that brings into dialogue both real and imagined histories. Written, scored, choreographed, and directed by Shawky, he methodically intervenes in the gaps of this chaotic and decisive moment in Egyptian history. By filling-in, inverting, or entirely challenging the record, *Drama 1882* calls into question the very premise of the notion of truth with its particular, dominant narratives around sovereignty. It sets the Egyptian Pavilion as the center-stage for a timely and critical conversation around the necessity of revisionist histories and the futility of war.



Much Older, Still Here

Andrea Viliani

The term “colony” derives from the Latin verb *colere* (“to cultivate”) and indicates a group of individuals who – in reaction to natural phenomena or, more often, for historical and economic reasons – move from a context of origin (“mother country”, the analogue to the modern concept of nation) to a new environment, settling there with their own habits and customs, beliefs, values, languages. First the Greeks, and then the Romans, colonized large areas of the Mediterranean, establishing their authority on the basis of their colonial expansion. Starting from the 16th century, various European rulers started colonizing large territories across the other four continents, progressively redefining the European kingdoms as true colonial empires. Although colonialism is identified as a modern construction – regulated in the context of international meetings such as the Berlin Conference, or Kongokonferenz, of 1884 – in reality, it reflects a much older history, which permeates European history to its roots. Between the second half of the 19th and the first half

of the 20th century, the so called “scramble for Africa” marked the transition from an indirect, military and economic control of the African territories, to a direct and political one, from a *de facto* colonialism to its systematic legalization. In search of a possible cultural justification for it, at least in North Africa, the resonance and reverberation rising from old legends, historical facts, and archaeological ruins dating back to antiquity, have been identified (annexed) as matrices of both modern European identity and its colonial legacy. Even the great museums of world cultures then under construction in European capitals, such as the British Museum in London, carried out a colonial function, entirely analogous to the weapons of armies and the contracts of commercial companies. It is perhaps no coincidence that Egyptian antiquities did not appear in them as “African cultures” but, precisely, as “Egyptian antiquities”. The *mare nostrum*, the Mediterranean, became in this way a European repository.



The history of the Venice Biennale takes place parallel to this extended and expanded colonial history. On 19 April 1883 the city administration decided to establish a biennial national artistic exhibition; on 30 March 1894, once the invitation system was approved, it was decided to also reserve a section for "foreign" artists; in the winter of 1894-95 construction began in the

Giardini of the main exhibition building, with the name first "Pro Arte" and then "Italia"; on 30 April 1895, in the presence of King Umberto I and Queen Margherita of Savoy, the International Art Exhibition of the City of Venice was finally inaugurated. The Egyptian Pavilion was inaugurated in the Giardini a few years later, in 1932.



In the palimpsest of these overlapping stories, here is the ancient city of Alexandria. A city of nostalgia, shaped by the imagination of its own citizens, destroyed and rebuilt, embellished and plundered multiple times. It is there that Wael Shawky staged his historical (counter-)epic, working in a theatre without a roof, where rain was pouring down on both the humans and their animals (a donkey, geese...), with the melody of a musical play that sounds like what one might have heard in a Coptic church... What place is this? What year is this? The nationalist Urabi revolt that from 1879 till 1882 opposed the British colonial Empire – which went on to occupy Egypt until 1956 – is narrated by Shawky as a documented and plausible, but ultimately unreliable story, in which past and present, facts and imagination, history and its fabrication, being a citizen or a foreigner, a hero or a traitor, become entangled. A puzzled, multi-species and both real and unreal scenario, which the artist profiles as an ensemble of both fabricated objects – the film itself, as well as the related sculptures and vitrines – and un-fabricated ones – his hand-made drawings – that celebrate and strive for human feeling and understanding, which is missing even on the faces of the

actors (who indeed act as if they were puppets). What emerges is an ineffable but radical sense and need for justice, the analogue of that divine punishment of the human sins, their worshipping of power – every generation getting worse – which is also found in ancient Mediterranean legends, which Shawky has interwoven into his recent films. In looking backwards, and at the same time forwards, we could therefore ask ourselves: Can we ever be, or go back to being, or finally become, human beings who are fair towards each other and our fellow species? Or... Could colonialism, or rather "coloniality" – a more blurred definition proposed by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano and explored in-depth by authors Walter Dignolo and Catherine Walsh to indicate the persistent dark side of European and Western modernity, the echo of an ancestral separation between hegemonic and subaltern mentalities and behaviors, which just do not allow colonialism to end – be the analogue of the flood and fires of the ancient myths? Are we cursed by our own stories? Or might we, one day, be freed thanks to them?

Projective Imagination

Sebastian Delot

The XIXth century is a strange century because European inner empires start to fail, very slowly but surely, while Europeans start the colonial empires established by the French, British, Dutch, Belgians, in all of Africa and big big chunks of Asia, if not all of it. Here, there are liberation movements, while there, in the same time, other peoples are being brutally submitted.

(Etel Adnan – About the end of the Ottoman Empire, 2015)

For the Venice Biennale, Wael Shawky delves into the past to take us on a journey. A journey back in time. How can we understand the present without knowing our past? The narration of his new film is structured around eight key moments in history to understand what started it all to the point of perceiving the need to draw a new map of the Middle East with the decline of the Ottoman Empire, which disappeared with the end of the First World War.

To consider Shawky's work, one can turn to the analysis in *The Atlas of Emotions* by Giuliana Bruno: "An architectural imagery is an active visual deposit: it is an archive open to the activities of excavation, re-visioning and re-envisioning in art. In these urban archives, doors are always open to the possibility of reimagining space, and archeology here is not simply about returning to the past; rather, it allows us to look in other directions, and especially towards the future, in an active retrospective movement".

But the records are not limited to what happened. They are made up of various image-creation trajectories. This construction is based on the inseparable nature of vision and travel. In an evocative montage of words, songs and images, the artist immerses the viewer in the posture of the voyeur, who must also be the traveler.

Shawky belongs to a particular family of artists who create atmospheres through film. What do atmospheres allow? How do they help create a visual environment? The artist reinvents projective imagination according to atmospheric thinking, in an approach which confronts the notions of projection and atmospheres as they have been formulated in other fields (the sciences, humanities, philosophy, history, and so forth). He has developed a unique artistic writing style that allows him to move freely between fiction, documentaries and historical events. In this installation, he uses codes specific to an era, in part by creating large

plates – relics of a bygone era.

Shawky is a pioneer in the development of a new cinematographic writing which expands the spatiality of the film form. To do so, he engages in the broader field of film installation. This way of working allows him to navigate between mediums to construct a work of totality: the sets, the scenario, the direction, the music. Whether in theatrical form or through installations, he always considers the screen as a porous material, which serves as a supporting structure for an intense projection experience. The screen is a place of transition, of passage. The screen allows everyone to access the intimate character, but also the life of the other, which is played out before our eyes. He

delicately constructs fluid geographies – landscapes of images of places (Alexandria, Istanbul, the Suez Canal...). Sometimes these territories become the portrait of the city. Long-held shots, like the slow movement of actors, allow the effect of extending duration, letting the location speak for itself. We are given access in this way to the internal logic of the experience of movement and change. The fixity of the plans keeps our attention sharp. We empathize with the scenes playing out before us, and so we are not distanced from the story. On the contrary, the scene that takes place "there" then becomes an active "here." This story can no longer be foreign to us because the chain of humanity links us to each other.



Chronicles

Yasmine El Rashidi

Friday morning, September 9th, 1881. A young Egyptian army colonel by the name of Ahmed Urabi leads his nationalist command troops into central Cairo towards Abdeen Palace, where he surrounds the residence of Khedive Tewfik. Tensions have been simmering all summer. Egypt's economy is in plight, and under the pretext of protecting creditors' rights, Great Britain's heavy hand in local affairs has sent rumbles of discontent through society. Corruption is rife, and there is growing sentiment among Egyptians that national resources are being pillaged, and countrymen undermined. Outside the palace, Urabi leaps upright onto his horse's saddle, bears and raises his sword, and demands that the British-backed Khedive yield to pressures for reform. Calling for the establishment of a parliament, an enlarged army, and the removal of the Ministry of Riad Pasha, he declares: "We come to offer the requests of the entire army and whole nation!" The Khedive replies with confrontation, "I inherited the kingdom of this country from my fathers and grandfathers and you are only our slaves!" Urabi challenges him, "we will not be inherited and will not be enslaved from now". Tension ensues. The Ministry falls. Urabi stands defiant.

It is the events of this September day that set into motion the British bombardment of Alexandria less than twelve months later, in an urgent attempt to overthrow the new

nationalist guard and reinstate the powers of the Khedive and imperial grip. It was also to this backdrop that a slender book entitled *Risalat al-kalim al-thaman* (Essay on Eight Words) was published just weeks after the palace stand-off. The book was written by Husayn al-Marsafi, a senior professor at *Dar al-Ulum*, which had been established a decade earlier to produce teachers for the new government, and in essence his writing reflected the pulse of the moment. The volume was quite literally a discussion of the meaning of eight words "currently on the tongues of the younger generation today". They were: nation, homeland, government, justice, oppression, politics, liberty, and education. As the scholar Timothy Mitchell notes in *Colonizing Egypt*, Urabi's ideas about political machinations had largely been formed through military manuals prepared for the French, and what al-Marsafi was addressing in his book was a political crisis that in his view grew out of a misuse and misunderstanding of words. Egypt needed its own system of education, and its own vocabulary and set of defined terms. This thinking extended to every facet of the idea and ideals of a sovereign state. This was what Urabi's troops would fight for.

It is on these historical grounds that Wael Shawky's *Drama 1882* is conceived, taking July 11th, 1882 as its centering reference point. On that morning in Alexandria, a widely-



chronicled café-fight between an Egyptian donkey-keeper (El-Ajjan) and a Maltese, spilled over into the streets, instigating riots that overtook the Mediterranean city and targeted local Greek, Italian and Maltese properties and businesses. Urabi had climbed military ranks from peasant-hood to eventually found his Egyptian Nationalist Party, with a campaign-line to secure Egypt for the Egyptians. His popularity was unsurpassed. A mire of questions then remain as to what exactly happened that morning to implode his popular uprising and precipitate the full-scale bombardment of Alexandria by British forces that culminated in the historic Battle of *Tel El Kebir* and his subsequent capture and exile. Was the café-fight between the Egyptian and Maltese a spontaneous

occurrence, for example, marking a breaking and turning point? Or was it indeed a premeditated episode intended to mask the pre-planned havoc that ensued? And what happened to the legions of Turco-Circassian officers and their footmen who were laid off en-masse by Urabi's government when he rose to Minister of War that day? Was it them who unleashed such damage across the city that it came to be described in accounts as "in ruins and ashes"? Or was it the Egyptian themselves, as they shattered foreign establishments, as the British suggested?

Urabi was exiled by the British to Ceylon Island (Sri Lanka) and left Egypt on December 28, 1882, along with nationalist colleagues. He remained in exile for twenty years

until 1901, when a decree of forgiveness was issued. He returned to Egypt, and died ten years later, on homeland. It seems fitting to this backdrop of entwined stories and histories that the Egyptian Pavilion at the Brenno Del Giudice complex plays host to Shawky's *Drama 1882*. The pavilion, with its grand arches and expansive grounds on the island of Sant'Elena, was originally built as a single structure to house Venetian decorative arts. Eventually split into two, the left-most space was gifted to Switzerland, as a national pavilion. It was only when the

Swiss eventually vacated the space in 1952 for a more prime location, that it was left to Egypt, as its permanent exhibition showcase. *Drama 1882*, with its precise and probing inquiry into questions of historical authenticity, and its revisiting of colonial history and the throes of empire with its mapping and re-mapping of geographies, sets the pavilion as center-stage for necessary conversations of reckonings with the past.



About Wael Shawky

Wael Shawky was born in Alexandria, Egypt, 1971, and trained in Fine Arts at the University of Alexandria and the Graduate School of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania, United States. In 2010, he founded MASS Alexandria, an independent nonprofit school for contemporary art, offering spaces for studio work, interdisciplinary research, and critical thinking education. Widely exhibited to international acclaim, among his most celebrated works are his epic film trilogy *Cabaret Crusades*, which recounts the history of The Crusades from an Arab perspective. Inspired by *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* by Lebanese historian Amin Maalouf, Shawky's videos chart the numerous European campaigns to the Holy Land, starting from the early Crusades from 1096–1099 A.D. that are depicted in *Caba-*

ret Crusades: The Horror Show File (2010), and the First and Second Crusades from 1099–1145 A.D. in *Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo* (2012) and *Cabaret Crusades: The Secrets of Karbala* (2015).

Shawky has received many awards for his work, including the Honorary Citizenship of the City of Palermo (2017); the Sharjah Biennial Award (2013); Award for the Filmic Oeuvre, created by Louis Vuitton; Kino der Kunst, Munich (2013); Abraaj Capital Art Prize, Dubai, joint winner (2012); Schering Stiftung Art Award, Berlin (2011); Grand Prize, 25th Alexandria Biennale (2009). In 2011, he was an Artist in Residence at The Center for Possible Studies, Serpentine Gallery, London. He lives between Alexandria and Philadelphia.



His work has been showcased at major international exhibitions including The Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, USA (2021); The Louvre Abu Dhabi, UAE (2020); The Polygon, Vancouver, Canada (2020); ARoS, Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Denmark (2018); Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Yinchuan, China (2017); Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy (2016); Fondazione Merz, Turin, Italy (2016); Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria (2016); Fondazione Merz, Zurich, Switzerland (2016); MATHAF, Doha, Qatar (2015); MoMA P.S.1, New York, USA (2015); 15th Istanbul Biennale, Istanbul, Turkey (2015); SALT, Istanbul (2014); K20 Düsseldorf, Germany (2014–15); Here & Elsewhere, The New Museum, New York, USA (2014); Serpentine Galleries, London, UK (2013–14); Re:emerge, Sharjah Biennial, Sharjah, UAE (2013); Documenta 13, Kassel, Germany (2012); KW Contemporary Art Institute, Berlin, Germany (2012); 9th Gwangju Biennial, South Korea (2012); Nottingham Contemporary, UK (2011); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA (2011).

Shawky has received many awards for his work, including the Honorary Citizenship of the City of Palermo (2017); the Sharjah Biennial Award (2013); Award for the Filmic Oeuvre, created by Louis Vuitton; Kino der Kunst, Munich (2013); Abraaj Capital Art Prize, Dubai, joint winner (2012); Schering Stiftung Art Award, Berlin (2011); Grand Prize, 25th Alexandria Biennale (2009). In 2011, he was an Artist in Residence at The Center for Possible Studies, Serpentine Gallery, London. He lives between Alexandria and Philadelphia.

Acknowledgments

The glass work would not have been possible without the help of Adriano Berengo, Berengo Studio

Thank you to the gallery teams:

Ana Siler, Lina Kiryakos, Sfeir–Semler Gallery; Giulia Tassinari, Maud Grep-pi, Lia Rumma Gallery, Claus Robenhagen, Victoria Mitchell, Lisson Gallery, Yunu Lee, Barakat Gallery

Additional thanks to:

Velvet Fabrics: Annamaria Alois, San Leucio

Copper Plate: Fonderia Nolana

Ambassador of Italy to Egypt Michele Quaroni and his wife Veronika

Marwan Elshazly and Panmarine Logistics

Dr. Waleed Kanoush: Head of the Fine Arts Sector, Ministry of Culture, Egypt

Ahmed Kamal Eldin: Director–General of National and International Exhibitions, Ministry of Culture, Egypt

Project Manager:

Giorgia Rea

Executive Manager:

Antonio Zanon

Sculptural Team:

Kain Walgrave

Giorgio Benotto

Installation Team:

Ibrahim Salama

Daniele Rancilio

Federico Elia

John Mirabel

Ikra Costruzioni

Audio–visual/ Light Installation:

Eidotech

Press Office:

Evergreen Arts

Graphic Designer:

Mona Zanana

Special thanks to the teams that made it happen in Egypt:

Film and Theater Producer

Mark Lotfy

Theater Assistant Director

Mohamed Farouq Rocky

Theater Executive Producer

Osama Al-Hawary

Musical Arrangement

Mohammed Hosny

Director of Photography

Mina Nabil

Vocal Supervisor

Mohammed Khaled

**Historical Writing and Proof-
reading**

Islam Salama

**Recording Songs, Mixing and
Sound Design**

Michael Fawzy

Choreographer

Mirette Mechail

Costumes Supervisor

Nahla Morsy

Editor

Mark Lotfy

Scenography Supervisor

Osama Gaber

Theater Executive Director

Ahmed Shawky

Production Implementation

Ahmed Sayed

Film Executive Director

Abanoub Nabil

Fundraising

Mai Eldib