

## A stimulating retelling of Ancient Egyptian stories



Samira Kirolos, performance storytelling of "They Did it Their Way!"



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By **Mariam Hamdy/Special to Daily News Egypt** June 12, 2011, 5:32 pm

Ambassador Marc Franco, head of the European Union Delegation to Egypt, and his wife Rita Janssen hosted an intellectual night at their residence in Zamalek last week. Having vowed to use their residence as a hub for local as well as international arts, Franco and Janssen have held regular cultural gatherings, bringing together various professionals, artists and professors in every art-related field.

That most recent night hosted Samira Kirolos, a PhD holder in drama from Stanford University. Currently based between London and Cairo, Kirolos practices performance storytelling: an art form floating somewhere in between theater, poetry and narration.

The performance was titled "They Did it Their Way!" and is composed of three separate acts, each telling the summarized stories of King Akhneton, 'King' Hatshepsut and Queen Cleopatra. I was somewhat skeptic about the show: what exactly is a storytelling performance? How can the lives of these three prolific Pharaohs be condensed into half-hour increments that do them justice? Dashing all doubts, Kirolos gave an engaging, amusing and heartfelt performance, making it a night difficult to forget.

At a time where opinions are stated as facts and judgments passed as final verdicts, it was refreshing to sit through a fact-based performance on the history of some of the most iconic figures in Ancient Egypt.

Performance storytelling is a peculiar and difficult art form to define. It cannot be put in a genre of its own since, in principle, movies, documentaries, literature, theater, music and fine art are all forms of storytelling. But 'pure storytelling' is an underrated and uncommon form of performance art which comes as a surprise since Egypt is rife with illiteracy yet has a genuine love of telling stories from the most profoundly political to the most trivial gossip.

Kirolos has a doll-like face and petite figure; watching her perform as a Pharaoh is both beguiling and amusing. With Akhneton and Hatshepsut, she seamlessly sways between the role of a narrator and protagonist, filling in historical information through narration and dialogue through acting. Watching these two acts is akin to sitting through a history class; placing yourself in the right mould as viewer requires a bit of effort. That fact in itself was both a stimulating and saddening realization: to be engaged, one needs to participate and be actively involved with the performance, a feat that doesn't occur that often considering how lazy and recipient we've become.

The stories of the first two kings (Hatshepsut referred to herself as King) touched on politics and history to place facts where they're needed, but the stories were told as though Kirolos had witnessed the events herself. Filled with nuances and intimate details, Kirolos appeared to be the confidante of these kings, allowed to share their most personal thoughts.

The best of the three performances was the Queen Cleopatra segment, which was performed entirely in first person. The method by which Kirolos tackled the story of the queen was very much in the "Sex & the City" vein; a decidedly feminine, feminist and womanly approach from which the belief is to function purely as a woman, with no reference from the male gender.

In complete odds with Hatshepsut, the queen who was adamant to be referred to as king, Kirolos's Cleopatra was all woman whose choices arose from the core of her female self. The way the actress portrayed the queen made her relatable and easy to understand, particularly her relationships to Julius Caesar and Marc Anthony. Women, it must be asserted, would relate to

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this performance better while men would simply love it or hate it, rendering this approach a perfect mirror to how each gender would feel about Cleopatra.

Two aspects made the performance entertaining and slightly quirky: the first was the use of simple props and even simpler costume changes. With no professional lighting, no extravagant costumes or jewelry and no props other than a chair, the performance was based on straightforward acting with no frills, showing a studied and minimal approach to dramatic expression.

The second was the use of Frank Sinatra as both an unusual commentator on the happenings in the stories, as well as to introduce the whole performance. An inspiration for the title of the performance, Sinatra's intrusions on the ancient world made their stories surprisingly modern and more relevant to the average viewer.

The performance was followed by a short Q&A session with Barry Kemp, Cambridge University Professor Emeritus, Zbigniew Szafranski, director of the Polish Center for Mediterranean Archaeology, and Kathleen Martinez, director of the Dominican-Egyptian archaeological site at Taposiris Magna.

If this type of initiative is contagious enough to spread through our society, we would achieve what the essence of the recent uprisings was all about. Here's hoping.



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