

Ali Farzat Interview by Sabah Hawasli
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Q. Mr. Ali Farzat, could you please define the “Art of Caricature” for us?

A. Caricature is a word derived from Latin (Carikira) that means exaggerating or magnifying. This art, according to available documents, goes back to 5000 years BC when the Pharaohs drew a bird climbing a ladder on papyrus.

Q. When did the art of caricature start in Syria and where do you classify yourself on the list of Syrian caricature artists?

A. The art of caricature started quite late actually in the early twenties of the last century through sarcastic magazines such as “Al-Bo’kouka” (Place of Assembly) and “Al-Modhek Al-Mokbki” (Causing Laugh Causing Tears).

My order among the Syrian cartoonists, was decided in a referendum that took place 10 years ago and was published in Tishreen newspaper. I was classified as number one.

Q. Who were the Arab and foreign cartoonists that influenced Ali Farzat?

A. I was influenced by the Egyptian cartoonist “Berni” who drew for the “Al-Ithnain Wad-Dunia” (Monday and the World) magazine. He activated the love of caricature within me. I was also attracted to the works of the American cartoonist “Oliphant” and the French cartoonists “Sambeh” and “Pluntu.”

Q. How did you start with this art and did you practice any artistic activity other than caricature?

A. My start with this art goes back to my fifth year of age when I was watching a man repainting our house in Hama. Before painting the walls he used to sketch some caricature drawings with a piece of charcoal. I have loved that art passionately ever since and discovered that it is the best frame or means to express my intrinsic sarcastic outlook.

I have, of course, practiced many related activities. I converted some of my drawings to movie cartoons, designed and implemented some artistic posters of political and humanitarian content on behalf of some festivals and exhibitions.

Q. After showing the drawings in your book (*A Pen Of Damascus Steel*) to a great many Americans I noticed their quick affectionate connection to your drawings. How do you explain this understanding and quick connection?

A. There is a paragraph in the preface that I wrote for my book that clarifies how human feelings of all the nations of the earth meet and glow in front of a noble human act that carries all the languages of the world without any written language, in addition to the fact that it is a performance that exists outside of time and place and applies to every time and every where in this world.

Q. The risks of the caricature career are probable and very many. We all recall the assassination of Naji El-Ali in London in 1987. Were you also exposed to such a risk?

A. I have indeed been exposed to physical and moral harm and to considerable threats, also to two attempts on my life. One of these two attempts was the loosening the bolts which hold the tires to my car, without detaching them. The second attempt of my life was the plotting of a demonstration of about 80 individuals against me with inimical boards and carrying cudgels. They headed for my office of Addomari newspaper and that was before the Syrian authorities closed it down. The aim of these demonstrators was to ruin my office and maybe kill me. That was because of some cartoons that I published against the regime of Saddam and also because the Tishreen newspaper had published two articles criticizing me for two consecutive days.

As it happened, at that time the TV correspondent of the BBC office in Beirut bumped into the said demonstration in front of Addomari newspaper office and asked one of the demonstrators how could they hold this demonstration of about 80 persons disregarding the law of emergency that do not allow demonstrating and assemblage of more than three persons. But

the man replied saying that there were security guidelines according to which this matter was allowed.

Q. During my review of the drawings in your book I noticed the absence of the Palestinian issue and the American supporting role to Israel. Don't you think that, because you are the creator of 15000 cartoons, that this absence would raise questions? Understandably, it did raise questions to some Americans.

A. I intended that this book include the issues and problems that any human could suffer in this world so that there would be no certain time and place. This matter makes my published drawings applicable to every time and place. My drawings are criticizing the whole range of inhumane practices in all forms.

Q. What are the ceremonial rituals of drawing for the artist Ali Farzat?

A. My ceremonial rituals of drawing are simply preparing a pot of green tea before drawing, preparing the idea, and I do not mind eating some mixed nuts and crackers during the work besides listening to some songs but all these after setting up the idea and only during the work.

•Q. Are you satisfied with your artistic heritage being an active power in awakening the people?

A. I am certainly satisfied, and I shall give you more than one piece of evidence for that.

I must say, first, that the people keep my drawings that I published for 30 years in their minds. They keep my drawings after cutting them out from the newspapers. This is not limited to a certain group of people, to a certain age, or to the gender of these people.

The other piece of evidence that I offer for the faithfulness of the people and their fidelity to my work is their opposition to the practices of the authorities when they have acted against me, when by the help of security cadres they tried to harm me physically and morally before they closed down my sarcastic newspaper (Addomari).

Before my paper was closed, I published many letters from readers on the paper's four pages. These letters condemned and criticized the official cadres for trying to silencing me and my sarcastic newspaper that broke the barrier of fear with the people. The people and TV satellites considered my newspaper to be a notable phenomenon because of its subjects and because of my sarcastic drawings, after the domination of the Baath Party and the official newspaper in the field of media for more than 40 years. I wish to mention now some of the barbaric practices of individuals (about 80 of them) who marched demonstrating in the streets of Damascus coming towards my office carrying boards with pages of official Tishreen newspaper that assaulted me strongly for criticizing the deposed dictator Saddam Hussein. That group of demonstrators tried to break into my offices and threaten those who were in it. They would have succeeded if it was not for the people passing by who supported my work and who confronted the demonstrators, in addition to the editors who were in the office that time. The editors got out of the office carrying some sticks from mops and pieces of hoses that were available, and thus the attackers were stopped and the demonstration was dispersed. Just to give an idea about the identity of those demonstrators, you know there is a valid law in Syria called the law of emergency according to which no demonstrations are allowed. So how was this demonstration of about 80 people able to march in the streets of Damascus without being questioned? This was the question that a correspondent of BBC TV asked the leader of the demonstration. The leader replied that they got a security approval.

Q. What is a successful caricature in your opinion?

A. A successful caricature is the one which after it is published people would say "This is what we were thinking about and want to say, but we do not have the means of expression."

Q. As an admirer of your caricatures I see each one as a success. I see that it is complete and that it really hit its target. Do you have the same feeling when you finish up drawing a caricature? That is to say, would a caricature be complete for Ali Farzat or do you suffer what poets always suffer, that something is still missing in the work?

A. I frankly have the same feeling as that of the poets you are talking about, especially after publishing my caricatures. I see myself as a reader, away from being the cartoonist that created that work. In many cases, as a reader, I feel delighted and admire what is published and I give certain comments on what is published as a reader, especially in the field of bravery that I wish it to be converted to even zealotry and adventure without ceasing in confronting injustice. This is what happens sometimes.

It happened in the last issue of my newspaper that I published when the police and security forces started collecting the published issue from the libraries of the market, then the government withdrew the license of the newspaper, closed down the offices, and started interrogating us by the political security forces because of the great critical subjects included in that issue. The price was very excessive but it was an interesting and pleasant experience.

Q. Does the art of caricature enjoy a popularity in the Arab world?

A. By all means and in all cases, YES.

Q. Does the art of caricature have the ability to bring about change more than other arts?

A. I think so because of its popular desirable specifics that is sarcasm, brevity, quick circulation among the people, its ability to weaken the adversary (opponent) during the sarcastic confronting and embarrassing the opponent when he makes a wrong decision, and creating a feeling of relief and enthusiasm with the people for the caricature and feeling that such caricature is standing with them and on their behalf.

Q. After closing down Addomari in 2003, do you have any project that you like to carry out?

A. I am thinking of converting the office of the newspaper to an exhibition gallery for caricature, opened to all visitors, for the sake of continuation with them after the close down of my newspaper by the government who held me back from publishing my caricatures in the local newspapers. I am also thinking of printing books and brochures and posters and a special CD to include my work.

Q. Can you give us some examples about your current work? (Ignored question)

Q. A distinguished poet is an individual who owns mastery of the language and has the courage to probe and explore such a language. Taking off from this saying, what characterizes the distinguished cartoonist? (Ignored question)

Q. In the end, what do you have to say to the American audience?

A. My dear American audience, I give you a whole world of love and art that I have created in my way. I am trying my best to get a visa to enter America in order that I go there to sign my book (*Pen of Damascus Steel*) that was published by Cune Press. But there is something hindering me. It is an employee in the American embassy in Damascus (I do not know if she is the consul or not). She is asking me to provide evidence and proof that I am an artist, as I am claiming, before she grants me the visa to meet you with my love.