

Malika Boussof

Woman, Theatre and Politics - in Algeria

Today I must also cope with the mental balance of actors who are prey to fundamentalists' terrorism and who must nonetheless fulfill the expectations of the public, while outside the theatre ambulance sirens announce that a bomb explosion has caused many deaths and wounds to people, amongst whom could be their family and friends.

How is it possible to even imagine the Algerian woman in theatre? Or even in a distant relationship to theatre, within a context of physical and mental violence which clearly demonstrates a will to annihilate a female discourse and proceeds to veil the woman's body so as to remove it (as the religious fundamentalists would say) from the temptations of the flesh? The rise of preachers of the new holy order has created new customs which, in daily life, translate to a compelling desire to reduce woman's status to its most simplistic. This status only allows woman to procreate and serve her master husband.

The Algerian woman, who more than forty years ago fought for the independence of her country alongside men, now sees herself rewarded in the most humiliating way possible. She is sent back to her kitchen, pots and pans, where she will hover patiently in the shadows waiting for the moment to return to centre stage. She will then transform the captivity which maintains her in the custody and at the service of man. This insistence in stifling the voice, denying the body, is experienced in different ways by these women who, under the guise of submission, hide a fierce intent to re-emerge. Depending on her capacity to adapt to circumstance, but primarily to serve a defence mechanism developed as a survival technique, each in her own way, will try to impose herself.

There are different types of the Algerian woman. There is the one who will at first accept wearing the clothes of a home-bound woman, before trying to break out of her anonymous world through procreation and then impose her newly gained power upon her children. She will nurture the ambition of reigning over her household as the only mistress. Her intent concedes to the spirit of the time and contains her influence within the family unit to which she will, in time, become the central figure. There she occupies the lead role, as in a theatre piece in which the script conveys an inescapable message, delivered by the principle character which she embodies.



The conservative Islamics take the calculated risk of being stripped of the role of leader when they exhibit a political leaning that takes women's voice into consideration. This is "usefully" exploited by the women who do not hesitate to focus themselves, in order to finally find a place within the group, in the hope of assuming (not always, but at least sometimes) its leadership. Let's take, for example the case of Leïla - illustrious unknown woman - beaten by her brothers, prohibited from going out by her father, her smallest movement always controlled by either her uncle or a cousin. If she wants to complete her studies, her family insists she wears the veil. She willingly accepts the new way of dressing because she quickly discovers the power of the *tchador* over her parents who are convinced that this clothing gives the status of saint to the "demon" - that is to say the woman - who wears it.

Leïla will start to loosen her chains by walking from the mosque to religious classes (this is not usual), and later by taking advantage of the spaces that present themselves. These are spaces traditionally reserved for men. It might be the podium of a meeting room or even the street, during a demonstration, where her whole body would go on parade. Leïla will come and go as she pleases, invested as she is by a spiritual power which enforces respect for the family. The same family which only a few years earlier martyred her. Nobody at home will any longer oppose her comings and goings, for it will now be generally accepted that under the guidance of the faith she can do no wrong.

The example of Leïla, though not usual, is not isolated. Many of those forced to hide their bodies under a *hidjab* will choose to join either an Islamic - of course - political party or a religious charity association. In this way she will have an effect upon her immediate environment. Within the seemingly apolitical association, which she openly

supports, Leïla will quickly attract the attention, not only of other women, but also of the real bosses (the men) who are not officially allowed to head a female organisation, which, for the sake of credibility, must be led by a woman. Leïla will speak out more and more often, always conforming to the radical discourse of her leaders, she will offer the image demanded of a woman totally submissive to man, but at the same time of a free woman because she has the right to speak. From gratitude she will busy herself to minimise or even redress all the blunders deriving from religious fundamentalism. She will become so well known that she will not have to wait long before being elected as head of the organisation of which she will of course become the best possible ambassador. The militants and sympathisers to the cause will unconsciously identify themselves with Leïla and experience, even if only indirectly, her new power. When Leïla shines on the podium, faithfully representing the retrograde recommendations of her political leaders and by consequence declaring war on all those she thinks have left the "straight and narrow path of truth", all those present will applaud her, absolutely believing that she has composed her own speech and that she speaks freely. It is precisely here where the great deception lies. The freedom of thought, action and expression demonstrated by Leïla is in fact very limited. She is aware of this, but she will be careful not to let others know. It is important to her to continue to triumph centre stage, watched with envy and admiration by some and with intrigue, ferocity and lust by others - the men. The power that Leïla allows herself to have as leader of the association is undeniable, even if it is the only thing left unrestrained. This power is tolerated by the supreme authority as long as it is not threatening - but on the contrary confirming - the real power retained by men.

This supervised freedom is not always valued, not least by those women who, unaccepting of *macho* behaviour, are soon branded as secular, which is to say lost, impure women against whom Islam dictates resistance. These women, deaf to intimidation and all kinds of threats, will face aggressive hostility and hardship.

Fouzia Ait-El-Hadj is a free-lance theatre director, not - according to the conservatives - a fit profession for women, but nevertheless theatre is her whole life. Expressing herself through the group of actors and actresses she directs, is so important to her, that today she is left practically alone practising her profession in an Algeria racked by violence and by daily massacres. Some of her male colleagues are in exile, some have been assassinated. Fouzia resists the temptation to leave everything, convinced that without culture and theatre, as a means of expression and growth, a country is dead. Her sister Hamida, also a director, moved in panic to France, joining a third sister - an actress - who had also tired of the struggle.

At forty-two years old, Fouzia is a survivor of a fragmented family of eight children. Her aims are crystal clear. With the suffering sound of someone being skinned alive, she tells how and why those in power banned and denied culture for years, regularly exiling artists it wished to silence. This happened long before the emergence of armed Islamic terrorism.

Today theatre is in decline compared to the role it played during the war for independence. It no longer spontaneously touches the public with its universal values, Fouzia would say regretfully. Fouzia firmly denounces the impoverishment of language, she does not accept the international dimension of theatre being stifled in preference to a return to the origins of an easily controllable theatre of story-tellers.

Algerian theatre dates only from 1926. In the past it developed the spectators' taste and aesthetic. In the seventies, visual and emotional appeal were displaced by a kind of oral presentation which systematically supported the leading political discourse and boasted the merits of a rampant socialism. The governments preached a return to a virtual "authenticity", thus provoking a haemorrhage, towards the European theatres, of choreographers and teachers, who had previously been trained at great cost.

Opposing their parents, Fouzia and her sister, enamoured with the performance world, decided to leave their advanced university studies, and in 1979 they travelled to Moscow to learn scenic techniques of the modern world. Over the years they discovered the magic of a theatre which adapts to all cultures, including the Algerian culture. Returning to their country in 1985, the Ait-El-Hadj girls secretly nurtured the desire for change. They re-opened the actors section which had closed in extremely poor condition fifteen years earlier.

Fouzia holds out firmly, seduced by the notion that in theatre the group comes first and there is no individualism. Many people depend on her and she cannot abandon them. She also needs to win her wager with the Algerian actors. "Europeans have a common culture which allows them to communicate more easily. They have the same social problems, the same religion and traditions, in short a common cultural base", she said while declaring that for herself she chooses a personal way forward to - for example - present the problem of the rich and poor. Each person, she believes, reacts in response to their own history and daily experience, and she maintains that if there is something to transmit "it should first of all be here".

Courageously she staged *The Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, resisting the

hostility of journalists who did not accept "this woman from elsewhere who dares stage a play with great actors." The critics did their utmost to banish her from the theatre. Fortunately Fouzia was supported by the artists.

"Mediocre supporters of a return to the archaic; miserable charlatans, who have no contact with culture in general, who work in the same way as public employees just waiting for their salary at the end of the month - have done everything they could to discourage me and force me to leave. But after the popular uprising of October 1988, these people were marginalised, even though the government made great efforts to keep them in place." Pronouncing these words Fouzia, with a cheeky look shining in her eyes, is incomparably modest, even though she has gathered a great number of awards. Her stubbornness has triumphed over the enemies of her theatre.

"Everything has been a struggle for me", she will say, aware that head-strong people are not popular in Algeria, even less so if they are women. Because of their artistic talent, women impose themselves in theatre in spite of a *macho* society that rarely accepts them. Women, once illiterate, integrate themselves within the performance world by rejecting taboos. Then they continue to live within this enclosed world which is forbidden to "virtuous souls". Convinced that only a man from the same environment can understand and accept them for what they are, they also marry within this world.

Most of them have left the country by now. Fouzia is becoming discouraged as her work becomes more difficult. More and more often she speaks of leaving, to see what is happening elsewhere. "Today I must also cope with the mental balance of actors who are prey to fundamentalist terrorism and who must nonetheless fulfil the

expectations of the public, while outside the theatre ambulance sirens announce that a bomb explosion has caused many deaths and wounds to people, amongst whom could be their family and friends."

More insulted than sad, Fouzia continues in hope, even though she does not agree that a news-station, school or factory destroyed by bombs should be re-constructed, whilst a burnt down theatre in the centre of the capital has been awaiting restoration for a year. "There are important things to do, but to protect culture is the most important of all", she affirms, convinced that it is not sticks or bombs that should forge the future generations, but culture.

Algerian schooling and archaic theatre have created monsters who kill. "Our children have not been brought up with the universal human values which allow the children of the whole world to resemble each other", adds this woman director in a sad voice. It is true that if children have been filled with violence, making assassins of them, notions of peace and tolerance need to be nurtured in them instead. This does not happen yet, unfortunately.

Translated from French by Julia Varley

MALIKA BOUSSOUF (Algeria), born in 1954, is a journalist. After the assassination of President Boussiaf, she voluntarily interrupted her television show and provoked a national scandal. Forbidden to write she left *Algérie Actualité* and became chief reporter at *Soir d'Algérie* where she continues to work today. Her book *Vivre traquée* tells her story.