

## Nehad Selaiha

# At the Fajr Festival in Tehran

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When the pilot announced we were about to land at Tehran airport there was a sudden, intense flurry of activity. Many passengers started calling the stewards and stewardesses for a final drink before the big drought and most of the women were frantically reaching into their handbags for scarves, shawls and *abayas*. Vanya Exerjian, Madiha and Layla, the three female performers accompanying Al-Warsha - the first Egyptian theatre troupe ever to visit Iran - were hardly recognisable. Clad in folds of voluminous black from top to toe they needed, as one male member of the group noted, tags to identify them. Thoughtful Vanya, having known me for years, had brought along an extra *abaya* in case the absent minded professor and theatre critic had forgotten exactly where she was going. Luckily, my daughter had consulted a web site which listed the dos and don'ts for prospective Iran visitors. Black was not mandatory, it said: all that was required was that women should be completely and loosely covered except for the face and hands. The colour of the cover was unspecified. When I emerged from the plane, I was in a baggy, ankle-length coat which I kept tripping over and a printed silk scarf which kept slipping dangerously backwards though tightly knotted under the chin and carefully fastened with pins. German critic Renate Klett, another guest of the Fajr Festival, told me later at the hotel that she had rehearsed with the scarf for a whole week at home, keeping it on all the time. I wished I had done the same.

I also wished somebody had warned me that men and women were not supposed to shake hands in Iran. Outside the airport we were met by a lot of people from the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Dramatic Arts Centre. Also waiting for us was the Egyptian consular who runs the Egyptian interests bureau in Tehran. Feeling a bit tense and insecure in my new getup - like an actress thrust on stage in an awkward, complicated costume without a dress rehearsal - I needed the reassurance of a friendly hand. I eagerly shook hands with the Egyptian consular and the ambassador and proceeded to do likewise with our Iranian hosts. It took me a few seconds to

realise that my hand was hanging in mid-air and quickly stuffed the offending limb in my pocket.

In the special car assigned for me (an unwelcome honour at that moment since in my confused, embarrassed state I badly needed the company and comfort of my Al-Warsha friends), my escort asked politely, in a sheepish whisper, if I would please cover my hair. I hastily pulled the front of my scarf forward and down until it nearly covered my eyes; but, "no... no," he said, pointing his finger to the back of my head. It transpired that an errant lock of hair had managed to break loose and creep unnoticed an inch or two under the tip of the scarf to peep at the world outside. I soon discovered that in certain circles in Tehran, educated women had wrested for themselves the right to bare a part of the top of their heads to the sky.

When I finally retired to my room at the Ferdossi hotel that evening, after studying the festival programme with my escort and deciding with his help which plays I should see, I was thoroughly exhausted but could not sleep. I lay in bed trying to get over that novel and disorienting feeling that I and my body were two separate entities, wondering what the performances would be like in view of the four crippling provisos imposed by the festival. The first was, as in real life, that all female performers should observe the Islamic dress regardless of any artistic considerations and whatever the play. Lucky for Hassan E1-Geretly and his Al-Warsha group that their *Spinning Lives*, which dramatises the first part of the popular epic known as *Al-Sira Al-Hilaleya*, artistically requires types of costume which fulfil this condition. In the case of the three productions of Sophocles's *Antigone*, from Germany, Greece and Iran, a local production of *Medea* and another of *Macbeth*, I foresaw no problems since the setting in all of them could easily accommodate the veil, might even require it, and the

texts were originally performed, both in ancient Greece and Elizabethan England, without women altogether. As for the Swiss *Memories*, written and directed by Otto Kukla, which I had seen in Germany last year, nothing needed to be done except dress the two female performers in scarves and long dresses; it consists of film projections, live music and reading and contains minimal movement. It could come across almost intact.

My imagination ground to a halt when I reached Sierra Leone's *Stubbornness* in my musings. Billed as a dance drama with live drumming and male and female dancers, it not only posed the question of how to dress the African female dancers according to the first proviso without impeding their movement or sacrificing its local colour, but struck me as an open and flagrant violation of the second festival proviso which strictly forbids female dancing on stage. No female solo singing on stage either, the third proviso stipulates, while the fourth bans any physical contact whatsoever between male and female performers, not even a handshake. I pitied the two actors burdened with the parts of Caligula and his mistress, Caesonia, in an Iranian adaptation of Camus' *Caligula* listed in the programme. They could avoid touching throughout the whole play and the audience could accept it as a theatrical convention; but how could Caligula manage the strangulation of Caesonia at the end, as he is supposed to do, without touching her? That was the question. I fell asleep trying to puzzle it out.

That mystery still remains unsolved; a couple of days later I went to see the play, but within twenty-five minutes I decided I had had enough of prim, wooden Caesonia and of raving, ranting Caligula and did not care what happened to them at the end. I sneaked out at the first opportune moment with my faithful and diligent escort, Rijan,

close at my heels. It was possible to leave Caligula because it took place in the largest of five small halls which, together with a main hall which seats 579, dozens of offices, a veritable maze of corridors and narrow stairways, and a cafeteria in the basement (called artists' cafe), constitute The City Theatre Complex in the centre of Tehran. It is a round, imposing and architecturally impressive building and throughout the festival it drew thousands of Iranians, the majority young men and women, eager to enjoy theatre, foreign and local, and, possibly, to gauge the level of freedom they have by what was being allowed on stage.

To my surprise, and relief, I soon discovered that the president of this year's festival (the 19<sup>th</sup> since it started and third since it went international), Dr. Majid Sharif Khodai and his team of organisers allowed theatre more freedom than one had ever expected or dared hope for - more freedom than any previous year, according to many Iranians. The regulations forbidding female dancing and singing were bravely bent in the case of Sierra Leone's *Stubbornness* and two other stunningly daring (by Iranian standards) local productions. The first *Puff*, a translation of a feminist play by an American woman playwright (whose name I failed to discover) was rendered into Farsi and directed by the late H. Hesami; it was the first play he was allowed to direct after a twenty year long ban and also his last; he died just before the festival when it was due to open. This sad story may partly explain the spirit of reckless defiance which permeated the whole performance and its electrifying impact on its Iranian audience. But even among foreigners, it proved a huge success and an exhilarating theatrical experience. At once serious and hilariously funny, it portrays a middle-aged, long-oppressed and battered housewife who, at the end of her tether, screams in the face of her husband for the first time in her life,

wishing him to hell. Something goes "puff" as the lights go out and we see sparks and smoke. When they come on again, we see in his place a small pile of ashes and his spectacles. This sequence, performed in the style of the old silent movies, takes up a very short time, and the rest of the play shows the woman slowly grasping, with the help of a neighbour, another oppressed wife, and two bottles of wine, her new-found freedom, her growing self-confidence and a new and thrilling awareness of her body. When her body begins to move involuntarily to the rhythm of music, she jumps up crying out, in an overwhelming burst of joy and energy, "I can dance." And she actually does, and with great gusto and abandon, grinning at the audience all the time and waving to it to join her. The rapport the actress G Adine established with the audience is hard to describe and was a clear sign of a passionate longing for freedom. The play ends happily with another curse, another puff which, this time, dispatches the brutal husband of the neighbour safely to hell.

At Sangelaj Theatre, which occupies a separate small building away from the City Theatre Complex, and facing a lovely, rambling park, I watched the other Iranian performance which broke the taboo against female singing and dancing, *Three Stories from the Arabian Nights*. Though I was given only a bare outline of the stories, and could not make out a word of what the actress Jayran Momken was saying, she managed, through her masterful control of her body and voice and her amazing emotional mobility, to speak volumes to me. There were other one-woman shows in the festival, all Iranian and all - like *Bahdat* (performed by Elika Abdorrazagi) which portrays the ordeal of a woman on the run from her monstrous husband - centering on the suffering of women in oppressive patriarchal societies. It was invigorating to find so many actresses defending the cause of women and protesting against the violation of

their human rights. If we add to these solo performances the ones written, directed or acted exclusively by women, the 19<sup>th</sup> Fajr Festival acquires a definite and pronounced feminist slant.

The theme of rape surfaced in *When We Return* - an unusual and exciting play about guilt, remorse, broken dreams and impossible longings, set in the countryside of Shiraz where its makers live. In a memorable scene, it presented in succession two deranged women in identical clothing both looking for a missing cow, wearing cow-bells round their necks and accusing the same man, who once kidnapped and raped a bride, of having milked them dry. My escort described the show as erotic and pornographic. I was startled and thought he was either joking or did not know the meaning of the words he used. I carefully reviewed the play in my mind's eye, but hard as I tried I could not discover any detail that was even remotely erotic or to which the word pornography could conceivably apply. Even the role of the seductive gypsy who waylays farmers on their way home to help her partner steal their cattle was played by a man in drag. My escort later explained that he had meant the verbal text by his description and not the performance and that any reference to sex, however oblique, was generally viewed as erotic. I instantly remembered how Hassan El-Geretly, who had used the word adultery in his synopsis of *Spinning Lives*, was asked to replace it with a less offensive term.

The word experimental too has a different meaning in Iran, at least among laymen. When I heard the use of live music in theatre described as experimental, I simply gaped. What's experimental about that, I asked. "It was allowed only three years ago," was the answer. By the same criterion one could describe as experimental the moment when the long, thick and heavy wig worn by the heroine of *Burnt Temple* slipped off when

she accidentally sat on it, revealing her real hair and causing the audience to gasp in chorus. Indeed, the genuine excitement and suspense caused by that trivial incident would be hard to match in any experimental theatre.

At the centre of *Stardust-Stricken*, one of the twenty-three Iranian plays I saw, is a conflict between a pupil and a teacher, involving ideas of obedience and rebellion and the meaning of education. As the play progressed the concept of education was redefined as a process of systematic conditioning, involving torture, terrorisation and physical brutality, and designed to break the will, inculcate obedience, stifle natural feelings and obliterate individuality and difference. Encased in a drab wire cage, and constantly flooded with images flashing on two screens, pupil and teacher grow more savage and violent; the torment can only end if one of them dies. But here it is not the young who die. Helpless, blind, deaf and dumb the pupil stabs her teacher, wrenches away part of the wire screen isolating her from the audience and steps out in a pool of light to the tune of an American pop song.

The sense of relief and liberation at that moment, after the oppressive gloom, the relentless cruelty and harrowing scenes, was very much like an intimation of a new dawn.

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