

Iraqi Women and Their Desires in a Brazilian Stage

Contributed by Isaura Daniel
Wednesday, 22 November 2006

Sitting on a bench, an Iraqi woman named Amal, fully covered by her black chador, talks about her three loves. The first one was a Saudi, who she married and by whom she was betrayed, the second one was a Bedouin who took her to live in Israel, and the third one was a friend of her first husband's, who lived in London and whom she truly loved.

The Iraqi woman nearly married her true love. The ceremony would have been held in the United Arab Emirates, because Iraq was at war. But one day, the London dweller said: "You are not the Amal I love." And there she was, sitting on the bench, trying to figure out that phrase.

Amal, just as Layal, an artist who paints naked women, and Nanna, a gadget seller, is a character of play *Nine Parts of Desire* (*As Nove Partes do Desejo*, in Portuguese), currently at the Sérgio Cardoso Theatre, in São Paulo, Brazil.

The play, which features actress Clarisse Abujamra, a granddaughter of Lebanese immigrants, portrays the lives, feelings and thoughts of Iraqi women. Most characters express themselves as they watch their country being devastated by war. The first Iraqi woman to appear in the play is a woman who goes to the city river every day, in order to gather up the shoes of the dead.

Nine Parts of Desire also depicts Layal, a modern woman who could easily live in Europe, but insists on staying in her country. "I am afraid of this place and I love this place," she says. Layal paints naked women - in the form of trees, so that the models are not recriminated by their husbands.

"The women here are not free, and still they love too much," claims the character. Layal herself was shot by her husband. The reason: she fell for another man. Layal's masterpiece, one of her pictures, wound up in the hands of Nanna, a woman who has a taste for sales. "Want to buy it?" asks the character, who even sells objects of those deceased in the war.

The play, written by US-born Iraqi descendant Heather Raffo, portrays a conservative Iraq, which places a series of restrictions on female behavior. "I always feel this emptiness, I cannot have peace, I think only men have peace," goes one of the characters.

But the play also shows that, under the abaya, Iraqi women have the same feelings and thoughts as Western women. They work for money, they fall in and out of love, they think they are fat; they have fears, angers, hopes. The author of the play is the daughter of an American mother and an Iraqi father.

The play debuted in Brazil in September, in the municipality of Santo André, in Greater São Paulo. It has also been staged at the Theatre of the University of São Paulo, and now it is running at the Paschoal Carlos Magno hall, at the Sérgio Cardoso Theatre, where it will remain until December 17th.

The original script was translated and adapted by Clarisse Abujamra herself, who also produced the show. She had the idea of staging the play after seeing it in New York, about two years ago. One year later, she spoke to the author. "I thought it was appropriate, relevant, due to the poetics and the power of the text," says Abujamra.

The name of the play is a reference to an Islamic saying, according to which God split desire into ten parts, and then gave nine of them to women, and one to men. The play was directed by Márcio Aurélio.

Clarisse is the only actress on stage, and she plays all of her characters by herself. She is 58 years old. Her paternal grandparents came from Lebanon towards the end of the 19th century. At about four years of age, the actress took up dancing and ended up in theatre, where she has remained for the last 37 years.

Service

As Nove Partes do Desejo

Date: Fridays at 10:00 pm, Saturdays and Sundays at 8:00 pm (until December 17th)

Place: Sérgio Cardoso Theatre, at Rua Rui Barbosa, 153, Bela Vista, São Paulo

Tickets: R\$ 30 (approximately US\$ 14 - full price)

Information: (+55 11) 3288-0136

Anba - www.anba.com.br