



ARAB AMERICAN WOMEN TAKE THE STAGE

by Shatha Almutawa

Silenced. Dehumanized. Villainized. Those are the words that come to mind when one thinks of the Arab American experience, especially after September 11. But the ethnic profiling and incarcerations of Muslims across the United States, the news of Guantanamo Bay, and the war on Iraq created an unexpected stir in the Arab American communities—a bigger involvement in the arts, and a more pronounced presence on stage.

PALESTINIAN AMERICAN THEATRE

Betty Shamieh grew up speaking Arabic and listening to Lebanese and Egyptian music in San Francisco, where her parents made their home after immigrating from Palestine in the mid sixties. “Almost the entire village of Ramallah immigrated to the US,” Betty says, so she was immersed in Arabic culture throughout her childhood.

After getting her undergraduate degree in English from Harvard and an MFA from Yale, Shamieh established herself as a playwright in New York City. Her plays draw from her experiences as an Arab in America, but are also rooted in history. *Roar*, about a Palestinian American family in Detroit during the Gulf War, was produced off-Broadway. In *The Black Eyed*, which was performed both in New York and in Greece, four Arab women meet in heaven: Delilah from biblical times, Tamam from the time of the crusades, Aishah, a suicide bomber, and a contemporary architect. Heated arguments ensue.

But perhaps most interesting is *Territories*, whose main character is a woman who insists on traveling to Mecca to perform the pilgrimage during the Crusades. On the way, she is kidnapped by the crusader Reginald of Chatillon, who was “one of the best torturers but also one of the best seducers.” This event was a catalyst for Salah El-Din’s victorious battle in 1187. So who is this woman? “From her perspective,” Shamieh says of her protagonist, “she said ‘I caused the war that ended the crusades, and nobody thought it would be worthwhile to write my name.’ That’s how the play starts out.”

The idea for *Territories* came to Shamieh on a visit to the West Bank, where she was teaching playwriting to children at the Aideh refugee camp. She tries to go back every few years to lead more playwriting workshops. “It’s very important to show children theatre too,” she says. “If you’re involved in theatre as a child it teaches you how to be a public speaker and have poise.”



Even as her work is often set in violent contexts—the Gulf War, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the crusades—Shamieh creates real characters who are neither victims nor villains. These negative images of the Arab as either villain or victim are all too common in the American media, which makes it difficult for westerners to relate to Arab Americans. “I think that’s part of the dehumanization.”

“I feel that there is hope in the Middle East,” Shamieh says. “Not long ago the Arab world was more culturally and scientifically advanced than the West.” But for westerners to recognize this, Shamieh believes that Arabs would have to realize the importance and power of the arts. “By supporting an artist you’re helping decide how your image is shaped, how your children are treated in school. People like Edward Said make it easier to be an Arab academic in America. I was an English major and I felt that very strongly, because people associated me with Edward Said.” Her goal for the near future is to have a play produced in the Arab world. “My plays shouldn’t be done in Swedish and German and Dutch before they’re done in Arabic!”



FROM IRAQ TO AMERICA

Heather Raffo was born in the United States to an Iraqi father and an American mother. Her play *Nine Parts of Desire* came to life after Raffo's visits to her family in Baghdad. "My time spent with them was full of conversation. Full of getting to know each other, sharing from the deepest parts of ourselves. In writing the play I was interested in finding out who I am as an Arab woman, as an Iraqi woman, and as an American woman with Iraqi heritage."

Nine Parts of Desire is about nine Iraqi women, and their complex lives and thoughts during the war. Even though the tales that unfold on stage are harrowing, one of the characters, Huda, says "Exile in London for the intellectuals is mostly scotch." She goes on to explain why she supported the American war on Iraq, even though she marched against war in Vietnam, Beirut, and Chile. "I prefer this chaos to permanent repression and cruelty. Saddam is the worse enemy to the people than anybody else. He beheaded 70 women for being prostitutes—He made them prostitutes. They kidnap a woman—she's just going from her car to her house. They take her as a slave. Sex slave or house slave when they are in their hideouts. When he finishes with her he goes to her family saying she's a prostitute. He puts her head in the street. There was no law if you're a prostitute. You are beheaded. So what chaos is worse than this?"

The response to the play, which was performed in New York, London, Chicago and other cities, was resoundingly positive. Iraqi women "tended to be extraordinarily moved by it. They stayed after the show just crying. They cry from a very deep place and they want to hold on to me and hug me and cry, then they want to feed me," Raffo says. "They felt so represented by the complexities of the issues in my play. I don't give one side of the Iraqi story. I give the other side too. Iraqis are forced to live on all these sides of issues. To have a play that represents the internal civil war is refreshing for them but also very hard. The women feel like I'm saying things that—not that they can't say, but to say it all at once and enact it. That's powerful!"



Raffo remembers her first visit to Iraq in 1993 fondly. After taking a bus from Amman to the Iraq border, "the man just shook my hand and looked so intently into my eyes and said 'Welcome to your father's country. Know that our people are not our government.'" I was blown away by that. People on the street wanted to nurture me, talk to me, tell me their stories. I didn't get a sense of an anti-American nature." In fact, after September 11, Raffo's Iraqi family was devastated. "My uncle was trying to reach me for three days, he kept calling and calling, but the phones in Iraq are always suspect but at that time the phones in New York were hit and miss. Three days later he left a message on my machine and it was just this triumph of loving relations," Raffo recalls. "He went on and on with this declaration of his care and sorrow for what had happened and his sorrow for what he called my great city. I found it so touching because they had lived through so much bombardment. So they knew what it was like. And I think that that's what he was communicating to me. The whole family in Iraq knew what it was like to have an attack on their city and I thought it was so unique that he kept saying 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry.'"

ARAB PLAYWRIGHT IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

Suehyla El-Attar, Egyptian American actress and playwright, takes the stage in the American south. Her play *The Perfect Prayer*, which has been performed across the US, portrays a young Muslim woman in Mississippi and her relationship with her conservative family as she questions her culture and religion. El-Attar was inspired to write this play after taking a college course her father taught on Contemporary Muslim Society.

"One of the things that happens growing up in a bicultural world," El-Attar says, "I think that you end up with no gray area as you're growing up. Everything is either good or bad. There's no middle ground for learning." In the play the protagonist goes from one extreme to the other. "I wrote this play when I was nineteen. I wrote it about my family. I wrote it as a way for anything that I had ever wanted to say to my parents, I finally said it to them on stage. Hadia got to embody all that courage."

El-Attar stresses that her work is not about Arab or Muslim experience, but about universal experience. "It was never meant to be about being Arab or about being a Muslim. It was about a family," she says. When an Arab character says a funny line on stage, "That line is said and everybody laughs. Muslims, Christians, Jews, agnostics, atheists... They laugh in recognition of family."

El-Attar also acted in the play *Bluish* in the role of a Jewish woman. This "was the easiest role for me to do," she says. "[The playwright] wrote the character so well that I thought I knew her. A lot of her insecurities are mine. She has a great monologue where she talks to a woman who's not Jewish and she tries to explain to her what it's like to be Jewish." At the end of the play the predominantly Jewish audience asked which of the actors in the play were Jewish. "They would always say that they thought that I'm Jewish."

El-Attar performed the *atha'an*, or call to prayer, for the first woman-led prayer in New York City in February 2005. Men and women prayed side by side led by Amina Wadood, a professor of Islam who focuses on women in the Quran. When she was growing up, "It was not the prayer that comforts me, but the call to prayer," she says. "When I was little I would call it. My grandfather was a *mu'ethin* and very well known in Cairo."

El-Attar's current project is a commission for Horizon Theatre, home to the world premiere of *The Perfect Prayer*. The play is inspired by the historical events in Clarkston, Georgia surrounding the youth soccer team *The Fugees*.

