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## THE CRITICS

### THE THEATRE

#### THE FURY AND THE JURY

by JOHN LAHR

Women, and men, make themselves heard.

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The first Gulf War came to us via satellite and without words. The road to Basra—the totem of that military cakewalk—was a silent spectacle of incineration. Now, in the second Gulf adventure, Americans can hear the war, but the wall of silence around the female experience of carnage remains more or less intact. War and tyranny dehumanize the enemy; silence is part of that process. To inflict pain, physical or psychic, turns us away from the world; we stop thinking and feeling. In “9 Parts of Desire” (at the Manhattan Ensemble Theatre), Heather Raffo’s remarkable one-woman show, which bears witness to Iraqi women’s political oppression, an expatriate named Hooda explains that, in the case of Saddam’s henchmen, “their way, I promise you—their way it’s to torture the people close to you.” She adds, “One woman I was with, they bring her baby, three months old baby, outside the cell, they put this woman’s baby in a bag with starving cats. They tape-record the sound of this and of her rape and they play it for her husband in his cell.” She asks, “How could these people have liberated themselves?”

As Freud knew, when you can focus only on pain your thinking is wrecked. For more than a generation under Saddam, Iraqis lived in a state of permanent paranoia, which left them passive and mute. “Iraqis know they don’t open their mouth, not even for the dentist,” the artist Layal, who was a collaborator, and who survived by painting nudes and doing portraits of Saddam, says. The very act of giving voice to feelings is a liberation to Amal, a fat Bedouin woman who tells of her hapless love life. “This is most free moment of my life. Really I mean this,” she says, after admitting, “I have never talked this before. Nobody here knows this thing about me. I keep in my heart only.”

“9 Parts of Desire,” directed by Joanna Settle, is an example of how art can remake the world and eloquently name pain. Based on research and dozens of interviews conducted on four continents over eleven years (Raffo portrays nine women in the course of the evening), the play brings news of the psychic life of the brutalized and allows us to think about the unthinkable. Raffo, an American whose father is an expatriate Iraqi, exists in that liminal zone between two cultures—a culture that sees itself in charge of the narrative of history and one that has seen its history wiped out. In a thrilling moment, Raffo, speaking as the play’s only American character, chants the words “I love you” and then lists the names of the forty-five members of her own extended Iraqi family, beginning with Behnam, Rehbab, Ammar, Bashar, and continuing until all are pronounced into our world.

As a performer, Raffo is deft and vivacious; her writing, like her playing, is marked by wit and by a scrupulous attention to the details of character. Among the many felicities of the narrative is her ability to change not just character but tempo, which gives the play its particular thought-provoking wallop. The shifts—mystical to secular, old age to youth, Iraqi to American—keep an audience at attention and at arm’s length. For instance, in the middle of a rant against the war Raffo, as the American woman, stops to observe, “I should get out, get something to—eat—I’m fat. I should go to the gym and run. . . . Anyway, I can watch it at the gym. People work out to the war. On three channels.”

The play, which manages to avoid the polemical, begins in prayer. The Mulaya—a professional mourner

whose improvised verse about the dead is meant, according to the stage directions, “to bring the women to a crying frenzy”—enters, dropping old shoes into a stream. “Today the river must eat,” she says. She goes on, “This river is the color of worn soles.” Her lyrical invocation elevates the water to a metaphor not just of the lost promise of the Garden of Eden (“Where is anything they said there would be?”) but of the emotional abdications of all women (“Underneath my country there is no paradise of martyrs only water, a great dark sea of desire, and I will feed it my worn sole”). Too often, a savage world has turned men into savages—brutes, betrayers, rapists—or into physical absences. A doctor whose husband lost his legs admits that she can’t even look at him. “He’s my death sentence,” she says. Male mayhem haunts the narratives like the disappointment in the epigram—taken from the teachings of the seventh-century imam Ali ibn Abu Talib—that are the source of Raffo’s title: “God created sexual desire in ten parts; then he gave nine parts to women and one part to men.”

Of the many atrocities that the women report, the most compelling is the spiritual mutation of Layal, whose collaboration with Saddam’s regime leaves her internally empty and morally bankrupt. She is beyond shame or pity. In her time, she has been shot by her husband for having an affair (“We never spoke about it”); a girlfriend, she tells us, was covered in honey and devoured by Dobermans in front of Saddam’s son Uday, whom she had foolishly identified as her rapist. “Here my work is well known, hardly anyone will paint nudes,” she says. “But this is us. Our bodies— isn’t it deserted in a void, and we are looking for something always. I think it’s the light.” Her way of dealing with self-loathing is to merge with the women she paints. “Always I paint them as me,” she says. “I paint my body but herself inside me.” Layal surrenders to her models; she also surrenders to her masters. “Always I run to them crying, begging, take care of me, they love me to run to them begging, so they can have me,” she says of her perverse sadomasochistic game with the regime. “If I am not afraid, then there is no feeling.” She adds, “I have been raped and raped and raped and raped, and I want more because they see me, they know me as I am, and that is freedom.” If she is nihilistic about herself, she also voices a chilling poetic prophecy about America’s destiny. “You have our war inside of you like a burden, like an orphan,” she says. “And we tether you to something so old you cannot see it. We have you chained to the desert, to your blood.”

“To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work,” the poet Mary Oliver has written. Certainly “9 Parts of Desire” is a triumph of meticulous observation.