

An American and Her Nine Iraqi Sisters

By LAUREN SANDLER

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BLONDE, Midwestern, Catholic: the writer and actress Heather Raffo seems an unlikely candidate to play an Iraqi woman, let alone actually be one. Yet Iraqi she is, both by heritage (on her father's side) and in her nine-character, one-woman show, "Nine Parts of Desire."

On a stage littered with blankets, books and paintbrushes, bisected by a pool of water representing the Tigris, Ms. Raffo, who is in her early 30's, pivots from one character to the next, composites of women she knows from eight years of interviews and living-room confessionals. Sipping Scotch and chain-smoking in the show, which opened on Oct. 9 at the Manhattan Ensemble Theater, the actress stiffens her neck to become an aging expatriate academic whose voice hardens as she describes babies tossed inside sacks of starving cats in the prison cell she once shared. Dancing along to an 'N Sync video, Ms. Raffo suddenly embodies a young girl who can tell the difference between a Kalashnikov and an M-16 shot as easily as she can distinguish the members of her favorite boy band. And most centrally, Ms. Raffo steps into the role of a bold artist who painted nudes and slept with regime officials.

"Nine Parts of Desire" began with this character, based on the infamous artist Layla Attar.

Visiting family in Baghdad in 1993, Ms. Raffo found herself at the Saddam Art Center one afternoon, transfixed by a painting of a nude figure on a background of trees that stood out among the portraits of the dictator. Ms. Attar had died that year when a bomb hit her house in Baghdad, and Ms. Raffo found herself curious about the artist and her supposed misdoings; dozens of interviews later, she had the central figure in her play.

One by one, Ms. Raffo added characters: for instance, an abaya-wrapped Bedouin woman who discovers her husband in her best friend's bed. For the role, the slender Ms. Raffo transforms herself into a heavy pile of breasts and stomach, as she confesses heartbreak and desire in a monologue that sounds more HBO than how some audiences might perceive women in the Middle East. Last year, the woman upon whom the character is based saw the production in London, where *The Independent* named it one of the year's five best plays. The actress said the woman later wrote in her journal: "Tonight I felt like a woman. I always feel like an Arab woman, but tonight I am just a woman."

The play's emphasis on sex is inherent in its title. It comes from a rare translation of a little-known saying, or "hadith," from a Muslim text, the 100 Maxims of Imam Ali, who led the Muslim world a few generations after Muhammad. "God created sexual desire in 10 parts; then he gave 9 parts to women and 1 to men," it says. The journalist Geraldine Brooks unearthed the hadith while seeking a title for her 1995 book about the daily lives of Muslim women, and was stunned to learn recently that Ms. Raffo had co-opted it for



Joan Marcus

Heather Raffo transforms herself into different Arab women for "Nine Parts of Desire." The play "unpeels layer upon layer" of their lives, said the journalist Geraldine Brooks, author of a book on Mideast women.

'NINE PARTS OF DESIRE'
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the play. (The play takes nothing else from the book.) But when Ms. Brooks read the play, she was so impressed by the material that her initial dismay melted away, she said. "It is resonant," she wrote in an e-mail message. "It unpeels layer upon layer of the characters' lives, never reaching for the easy or simple assumptions about who or what is to blame for their predicaments."

That depth of understanding bemuses even Ms. Raffo, who was raised without any overt Arab influence. "Maybe it's just blood," she says, "or the first gulf war, when I was 20 and I watched it on CNN. That was my defining moment in life and I've been trying to figure out who I am and who they are ever since."