



Reviews

Nine Parts of Desire

By Heather Raffo. Dir. Joanna Settle. With Raffo. Manhattan Ensemble Theater (see Off Broadway).

Heather Raffo performs her riveting solo show, *Nine Parts of Desire*, with the exactitude and artistry of an accomplished mosaicist. In a series of brief monologues, with consummate attention to character, she vividly inhabits nine distinct Iraqi women: Some are based on real-life figures, such as Layal, a painter from a rich family, breezily bohemian one moment, scared and defensive the next; others are composites that the playwright has based on a decade of interviews. Raffo's women, each uniquely colorful, merge to form a complex portrait of modern Iraqi identity that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Any discussion of Iraq is bound to have political resonances. But liberal audiences may be surprised by the variety of stories that Raffo brings to light. One woman mourns the death of her family in a 1991 bunker bombing, and another – a blond American of Iraqi descent – painfully recalls a telephone conversation with Baghdad



relatives on the eve of the U.S. invasion. But other characters decry the savagery of Saddam Hussein in terrifying detail and express relief at the American presence. And one of the play's most affecting monologues – delivered by a Bedouin woman searching for love – has nothing to do with politics. Under Joanna Settle's fluid and astute direction, Raffo shifts identities with the merest adjustments of her long black robe. She delves with passion into the souls of her subjects, and one can only be grateful for what she unveils. – *Adam Feldman*