

## THEATER REVIEW

## THEATER REVIEW: A Solitary Woman, Embodying All of Iraq

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Published: October 14, 2004

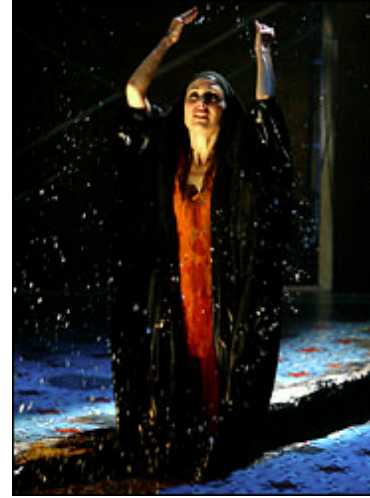
The voices are a study in contrasts: vivid and subdued, sophisticated and naïve, seductive and standoffish. But they cohere to form a powerful collective portrait of suffering and endurance in "Nine Parts of Desire," Heather Raffo's impassioned theatrical documentary about the lives of contemporary Iraqi women.

Ms. Raffo, an American actress of American and Iraqi heritage, is the sole performer on the stage of the Manhattan Ensemble Theater. But she's far from lonely up there: she inhabits her characters with such compelling vibrancy that they do not entirely disappear when she moves from one to the next. Instead, they seem to linger in the shadows of the set, nodding in sympathy or clucking with disapproval, as each woman in turn offers her own perspective on the country's harrowing recent history.

Current events have been swamping the stage in recent months, as politically engaged playwrights have vented their ire at the current administration and its foreign policy. Tim Robbins weighed in with his dim view of the invasion of Iraq, and the media coverage of it, in "Embedded." David Hare has dissected the political drama behind the run-up to the conflict in "Stuff Happens," still inspiring editorials in London.

But the voices of ordinary Iraqi citizens haven't made the leap from newspapers to the popular stage, and Ms. Raffo's play provides a welcome respite from the concentration on wide-angle perspectives. It's a reminder that the costs of tyranny and violent conflict are borne not by some amorphous, insentient collective population but by individuals, in this case women whose lives have been frayed and fractured, sometimes beyond repair, by their country's tortured history.

Bush foes expecting a polemical broadside will be disappointed. Ms. Raffo drew on more than 10 years of interviews to assemble her theatrical mosaic, and the commendable results reveal that she is a journalist, not a purveyor of propaganda. There is plenty here to fuel outrage at the suffering of Iraqi citizens directly caused by American bombing. But Ms. Raffo's women also bear witness to the monstrousness of Saddam Hussein's regime, with more than



Joan Marcus

Heather Raffo, of American and Iraqi heritage, in her solo show.

one of the play's characters fiercely avowing that no price is too high to rid the country of his brutality.

Tellingly, several characters express contradictory impulses that illuminate the agonizing burdens their nation's troubled past has placed on them. Layla, one of the play's most engaging, intriguingly complicated figures, is a self-infatuated painter who defiantly admits to having been favored by the regime. She was given the coveted post of curator of Mr. Hussein's art center. But her spirited chatter is full of ugly details. She immortalized in watercolor one acquaintance who was killed after telling a friend about her abuse at the hands of one of Mr. Hussein's sons. "They stripped her, covered her in honey and watched his Dobermans eat her," she briskly says.

Hooda, an exiled academic, watches the London protests against the war with an ambivalence that seems to exhaust her. "I have my doubts about American policy," she says, wearily brandishing a glass of Scotch. "Still, I prefer this chaos to permanent repression and cruelty." Hooda has lived a life of permanent transience, having fled Iraq in 1963 and wandered the globe ever since, protesting oppression. Now she isn't sure what to protest. "This war is against all my beliefs," she says, "and yet I wanted it."

Ms. Raffo gives voice to less worldly points of view, too. The caffeinated sophistication of Layla is juxtaposed with the majestic gravity of a woman who has dedicated her life to tending the bomb shelter that became a mass grave when an American bomb struck it during the first Gulf War in 1991. Ms. Raffo embodies this character, who lost her entire family in the catastrophe, with a stillness that helps to etch her gruesome testimonial in the mind. By contrast, she turns up the energy to get inside the skin of a bopping teenager whose 'N Sync sing-along is ended by a blackout, leaving her nothing to do but regale us with family news: Grandpa and Grandma, unable to speak English and afraid to answer the door when the Americans knocked, were killed when a tank rolled through the apartment.

Ms. Raffo's portraits are all marked by such vivid, memorable details. Occasionally, the writing betrays her desire to transform simple testimony into something more lyrical, and she seems to feel the need to provide a violent climax. That kind of dramaturgical tinkering isn't really necessary. It's not eloquence and form that matter here, but authenticity. The play may not be particularly distinguished as a dramatic text, but it is effective as humanistic journalism.

In any case, a measure of lyricism is provided by Ms. Raffo's fluid and energetic performance, which has been sensitively shaped by the director, Joanna Settle. Multiple-character solo plays automatically elicit ooh's and aah's at the actor's versatility, but Ms. Raffo is not really the kind of performer who can, with the aid of a flawless accent and a prop, magically lose herself

inside a character. This is not an indictment. Your awareness of Ms. Raffo as a performer doesn't detract from the play's effectiveness. The actress's solitude onstage becomes a poetic statement about the nature of the suffering she so persuasively describes.

### Nine Parts of Desire

Written and performed by Heather Raffo; directed by Joanna Settle; sets by Antje Ellermann; costumes by Mattie Ullrich; lights by Peter West; original music and sound by Obadiah Eaves; props by Kathy Fabian; production stage manager, Lisa Gavaletz; assistant director, Shana Gozansky; production managers, Gene O'Donovan and W. Benjamin Heller for Aurora Productions. Presented by Manhattan Ensemble Theater, David Fishelson, artistic director; James Sparnon, producing director. At Manhattan Ensemble Theater, 55 Mercer Street, SoHo.