

THEATER- The Wall Street Journal

## Invisible Women

By **TERRY TEACHOUT**  
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NEW YORK -- How do we know what we think we know about life in Iraq? After the re-election of George W. Bush, the continued fighting there was the top news story of 2004, yet the agenda-driven, visually oriented accounts of the mainstream media had little to say about the everyday existence of the Iraqi people, and told us next to nothing about their feelings and fears. It is as though we were waging a war in a land populated by stick figures -- which may help to explain why it is an artist who has done what so few reporters have even thought to do, and done it with a persuasiveness that fewer still could hope to rival.

Heather Raffo, the Iraqi-American playwright and performer of "**Nine Parts of Desire**," directed by Joanna Settle and now playing Off Broadway at Manhattan Ensemble Theater, brings us closer to the inner life of Iraq than a thousand slick-surfaced TV reports. Yet her beautifully shaped one-woman play is a play, not a stodgily earnest piece of documentary theater, and therein lies its singular force and compulsion: It is persuasive precisely because it is beautiful.

### Fully Believable

Ms. Raffo's enigmatic title is explained in her epigraph, a maxim of Ali ibn Abu Taleb, founder of the Shiite sect and fourth leader of the Islamic world after Muhammad: "God created sexual desire in 10 parts; then he gave nine parts to women and one to men." The nine characters she portrays are based on a large and diverse group of real-life women -- a doctor, a painter who ran the Saddam Art Center, a left-wing political exile living in London, a young girl who loves the music of 'N Sync -- whom she interviewed over the past decade, and she evokes their dissimilar personalities (and appearances) with a precision reminiscent of Jefferson Mays's high-wire acts of multiple impersonation in "I Am My Own Wife." Each one is wholly believable, but not in the straight-from-the-transcript manner of such exercises in theatrical polemics as "Guantánamo." We believe in their reality because Ms. Raffo inhabits each one so fully, both as actor and as author, and because we never feel, not even for a moment, that she is making them tell us what we -- or she -- want to hear.



Joan Marcus

I know nothing of Ms. Raffo's political views. In any case, they are not her subject matter (though the Iraqi-American in "Nine Parts of Desire" appears to be at least a partial self-portrait). Some of her characters support the war, others oppose it. Most express no settled opinion about it. For them, violence has always been an inescapable part of their lives -- especially their lives as women in an inconceivably repressive culture -- and it is simply not possible for them to envision a world without it. Time and again they utter phrases that illuminate the blasted landscape of their native land like flashes of lightning. No critic, however eloquent, can do better than to quote a few of them:

- "I did a painting once of the young woman who was eaten by Saddam's son."
- "My husband, he sits at home without his legs. He can't make money sitting at home -- what's left of the man -- I can't even look at him now -- he's my death sentence!"
- "Why don't we count the number of Iraqi dead?"
- "The mistake is not this war. The mistake was supporting Saddam all his life."
- "Now they steal women for money or to sell them. I try to tell mamma she won't get stolen. Her hair is not that nice."
- "I think only mens have real peace. Womans cannot have peace. What you think?"

Already extended three times by popular demand, "Nine Parts of Desire" is now playing on an open-ended basis. See it soon. See it tonight.

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***Mr. Teachout, the Journal's drama critic, blogs about theater and the other arts at [www.terryteachout.com](http://www.terryteachout.com). Write to him at [teachout@wsj.com](mailto:teachout@wsj.com).***