

Iran Today

I would like to share with you a story, my story, not as a sample of a regime's stupidity and censorship, but as an example of a young society's resilience and awareness.

Much has been spoken about the tyrannical regime in Tehran. As was the case with Iraq's Saddam Hussein, there is little disagreement among us about the existence of atrocities committed against women, persecution of homosexuals and other violations of human rights within my country.

But it must be remembered that contrary to the New Orientalist view presented in such best sellers as Reading Lolita in Tehran, most Iranians are intelligent, educated and creative people who, while being compassionate and benevolent individuals, are well able to think for themselves and take their future into their own hands.

Iranian society is alive and breathing, however polluted the atmosphere. It is a society of youth, in both age and cultural democracy. We are seeing a homegrown, grassroots journey toward celebrating similarities and accepting differences. A slow, but steady, move in the direction of compassion and love.

You may wonder what this all have to do with my title, Shakespeare in Tehran? Well, it was the seven years of teaching in Iran and the experience of staging a play by Shakespeare, that taught me how much this new generation has indeed surpassed mine, and those before me, in accepting differences and conversing about decisions made, and paths taken.

Yes revolution is not a dinner party, it does not happen over night. And perhaps the Iranian Revolution against monarchy has planted the seeds of evolution within my people; seeds that in the past decade we have seen blossoming in young branches, however much the chainsaws of a barbaric regime may attempt to stunt their growth.

I am a theatre person, and therefore I would like to share two theatre stories, one from the time when I was a student, and one from a more recent past, when I directed Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Tehran.

It was the mid-seventies and we at University of Tehran were responding to the regime's oppression and misuse of the public funds in its glorification of monarchy. It was spring, and the college gardeners had planted new flowers in the courtyard. Brecht's *Vision of Simone Machard* was on stage. When the curtain fell, an audience of some 300 youth (myself among them) poured into the university's courtyard, chanting slogans against the regime. We marched around, and some even carried improvised signs.

A university police officer was watching in dismay, every now and then he would yell; "You! Watch out, you are crushing the flowers!" Hearing this made me laugh. A fellow student objected to my laughter, pointing out that people are demonstrating against the Shah, and that meant that the play had done its job. "This is why Brecht wrote this play," he said.

I disagreed and tried to explain the absurdity of what I had just witnessed. Offering a different perspective, I said that Brecht would not have liked such an ending. He would have preferred to **enlighten** the audience, distancing them from such emotional reaction.

"I understand what it is that we don't want," I said, "but where would we be tomorrow? Have we really thought about what it is that should replace this regime?" Continuing my point about such momentary and emotional reactions, I quoted the Beatles: "you better change their minds instead!"

That night I was called, among other things, an agent of SAVAK, a Qarbzadeh, and even a faggot. I walked home a few minutes later with my eyes bruised, my nose bleeding and a severe pain in my right side.

Twenty years later, when our production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was attacked we were, once again, ridiculed, insulted, and called Qarbzadeh.

This time, however, in response to the thugs who stopped the production and demanded that the audience leave the Freedom Museum, a company of some 40 young actors and crew agreed that "these gentlemen have as much right to want to close our play as we have to perform it," and suggested: "why don't we stop this performance now and ask these gentlemen to come on stage and tell us why they want to close this play." The audience of some 500 youth cheered profusely, declaring: "Yes. What we need is dialogue not dictates!"

The fate of this production and its demise is published in a memoir entitled Exiled to Freedom, with copies here for you to take.

Today, however, I will share a few moments of this experience. An experience that turned *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into a Midwinter Nightmare. Then I will present to you a shortened version of a documentary that was made thirty months after the closing of *the Dream*, and end with few closing remarks.

Artistic Censorship in Iran usually involves intervention at any one or all of three stages: The artist's intention to create; the artist's engagement in the creative process; and the artist's presentation of what he/she has created. Thus, our 1999 production was a perfect example of Iranian censorship in action.

During my seven years living in Iran (1993-1999) I petitioned the authorities to stage 124 plays. None were accepted. None were rejected. I faced a wall. It was as if I had never petitioned.

Finally, after the 1998 election of President Khatemi, permission to stage *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was issued because it was "a comedy," in the words of the director of Center for Performing Arts, "with little similarities to the present society of Iran." He was concerned that "there are polluted minds in this country that have nothing better to do than to find faults in an absolutely innocent production." Therefore he advised, "We must choose a play that would minimize such sick interpretations."

During the creative process, there were three examples of interference – at least. The first government observer at our rehearsals did not insist that we change anything, but pointed out that no one would like our play. "Shakespeare is serious and profound," he said "your production is gay and playful. This may be OK for Western audiences; they are shallow and light-minded, but our people are Muslims." He suggested that the actors move less, and simply "recite the lines of this great playwright." I decided to stay with our less profound Shakespeare.

A second observer was bothered by Helena telling Lysander that he should go and be happy with Hermia. "One should not be happy with earthly love," he commented. "She should tell Lysander to go and marry Hermia."

When I explained that the whole play was based on the premise that Hermia's father would not allow her to marry Lysander, he told me sternly "we do not want our youth to be infatuated with this kind of love." We settled on "go be with Hermia."

Finally, there was the problem of the appearance of a woman touching a man in a scene where Hermia pushes Lysander away. Knowing the restriction, I placed the actors about 12 inches from one another and choreographed their movements to indicate Hermia's push. "I know they did not touch, but people may think they touched, and you know we can't have that." "But sir," I responded, "The art of theatre is make-believe. If we do our job well, people will think they touched." We finally agreed to place the actors two feet apart.

Ultimately, the production was shut down by the Revolutionary Guards on its fourth performance. Their intervention inadvertently resulted in a bit of irony.

The break up of the production took place during act 2, scene 2. Titania calls to the Fairies, "Come, now a roundel and a fairy song." She ends her speech demanding "Sing me now to asleep." The fairies began to chant a melody.

As they chanted, a Revolutionary Guard stood up in the audience and shouted, "Enough! Stop this nonsense instantly and leave the stage!" A fairy sang, "You spotted snakes with double tongue, thorny hedgehogs, be not seen." Another bearded man shouted, "You heard him! You infidel creatures get off the stage!" Another fairy: "Newts and blind worms, do no wrong. Come not near our Fairy Queen."

Up to this moment the audience thought it was all a part of the production. They believed the artistic team had planted these individuals in the audience. Everyone seemed to enjoy the interaction.

Then a third angry Revolutionary Guard dressed in black stood up and screamed, "Get off the stage you whores, you shameful whores get off this blasphemous stage!" The audience now realized that this was not a part of the performance. The actress, however, continued, "Beetles, black, approach not near. Worms nor snail, do no offence."

The lighting operator brought up the house lights. The chanting stopped. The brave young actress shouted, "I will not leave this stage unless my director says so." Two hours and ten minutes later, the Revolutionary Guards left.

The actors insisted that they want to perform the rest of the play. The censor addressed the theatre: “It is getting late and the audience is tired.” A woman visibly in her last weeks of pregnancy stood up with obvious difficulty. “No one could be as tired as I am. And I am not tired of sitting here. What I am tired of are your lies and deceptions.” The audience cheered. Taking a deep breath she added, “I am tired of people like you thinking that every one in this country is stupid!”

Theatre, at least in the traditional definition of the phrase, is an art based on dialogue as a method of exchanging feelings and ideas. Sometimes it offers profound insights into the human condition. I believe that every society, however ideologically narrow and single-minded, can benefit from a meaningful dialogue with a genuine theatre.

My experience during the odyssey of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* involved threats, intimidation, misdirection, human errors, bureaucracies, shenanigans, ignorance, prejudice, ideological conflicts, and a host of other distractions.

In my country, I am not unique in having undergone this kind of ordeal. In fact it is the *sine qua non* for any artist, poet, or intellectual who dares challenge the prevailing fundamentalist ideology. Who cares enough to offer a vision of what might be. Who shares ideas of openness, engagement, and simple human dignity.

Nevertheless, my belief in the power and importance of art and its ability to provoke thought and provide a forum for changing ingrained beliefs and assumptions sustained and strengthened me. But I would prefer that you hear the words of the company itself as they recount their experience two and half years later

PLAY THE FILM

After the Film

Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a story of love: The love of a fairy king for a fairy queen; the love of common workers for the art of play-acting; and perhaps most central to the story, the love of four young people for one another.

What its production in Tehran produced, however, was a love among a group of people, young and old, for what they believed in. A love that is still present every time they meet.

In his reaction to this film, Richard Schechner, the renowned American director and theorist, remarks that "Shakespeare is relevant when his works are produced and just as relevant when the sencor stops the production." In this documentary he sees, "courage and poetry. And the entirely human unstoppable urge to make art."

Ralph Blasing, theatre scholar and teacher, writes: "The Iranians in this film are compassionate artists, struggling to recapture the honesty that they achieved onstage which is not possible in their daily lives. They speak self-critically of their shortcomings precisely because they are aware of the potential power of their work. This is the heart of the theatrical enterprise exposed, as the company members speak unabashedly with bitter tears and clear vision. . . . This film is a reminder, across the divide of politics and culture, of the unifying power of the arts."

Much has remained the same in Iran today as the time I lived there, but what I have come to learn during my repeated visits has made me believe in the resilience and knowledge of the Iranian youth.

I have come to see that Iran, and especially Iranian youth have moved forward, slowly but steadily, towards such democratic ideas that my generation could not have even dreamt about.

They have learned to accept one another's differences and resolve conflicts through negotiation and dialogue. They have learned to think of what it is that they do want for their future and the future of their country. They have gained the knowledge that they must pave this path through the process of evolution, and not a bloody take over, be it from within or without Iranian borders.

The Iranian theatre today needs our help; not, as some theatre scholars do, by submitting to the invitations of the regime and attending government-sponsored and controlled festivals to promote its propaganda, as they did some 40 years ago with the Shiraz Arts Festivals.

The Iranian theatre today needs our help by providing educational opportunities for its young artists and scholars, whether by traveling to Iran to teach them, or by allowing them the opportunity to learn from us either through Internet connections, or by helping them continue their studies abroad.

Let us not destroy this young society by submitting to the expansionist will of those who rely only on military might to change nations.

Let us remember Hafez's line that:

No matter what those who are familiar with the path of love do to me
Complaining to strangers about it is something I'll never do.