



PROJECT MUSE®

Lysistrata on the Arabic Stage

Marina Kotzamani

PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art, PAJ 83 (Volume 28, Number 2), May 2006, pp. 13-18 (Article)

Published by The MIT Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/paj/summary/v028/28.2kotzamani.html>

LYSISTRATA ON THE ARABIC STAGE

Marina Kotzamani

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* is one of the world's foremost anti-war plays. Written and produced during the Peloponnesian civil war between Athens and Sparta the play expresses strong criticism of the war. Its basic premise is that all the women of Greece, under the leadership of Lysistrata, go on a sex strike so as to pressure the men to stop fighting. They also occupy the Acropolis, the symbol of Athenian democracy, transgressing on a traditionally male space to prevent men from getting money for the war. In Aristophanes' comic utopia, sex and politics are inextricably bound: peace is identified with sex and war with the absence of it. The universal sex strike is successful, as men find it impossible to do without sex and the comedy has a happy, though ironic ending.

Whatever the meaning of the play in antiquity, *Lysistrata* has strongly fascinated modern audiences and has been by far the most frequently performed Aristophanic comedy of the twentieth century in the West.¹ Once again *Lysistrata's* significance as a classic has been highlighted as an open-ended work that can be shaped to respond to cultural concerns across time and geography. As part of the Lysistrata Project over 1000 readings of *Lysistrata* were held worldwide on March 3, 2003, to protest the war of the U.S. against Iraq that was then imminent.² This innovative project was initiated and organized by two New York-based actors, Kathryn Blume and Sharron Bower who, using the resources of the Internet were able to mobilize over 300,000 people and to set up readings in 59 countries in just over six weeks. The remarkable grassroots effort sustains a strong twentieth-century tradition of regarding *Lysistrata* as an activist play, and attempts to reformulate its politics on a global scale.³

While the majority of participations in the Lysistrata Project were from the West, a few readings were held in Arabic countries, particularly of the Mediterranean region. As a Greek, coming from a country that has been in close contact with Mediterranean Arabs, these readings stimulated my curiosity: what does it mean to stage *Lysistrata* today for Arabic audiences? In an attempt to answer this question I invited Arab theatre practitioners, playwrights and theorists from the Mediterranean to write, hypothetically, about how they would stage *Lysistrata* in their own cultures. I began the project in the spring of 2004 and presented it in an earlier form at the

intercultural conference, *The Comic Condition as a Play with Incongruities*, held at the University of Tetouan, in Tetouan, Morocco, April 27–May 1, 2005.

Even though Aristophanes is not unknown to the Arabic theatre of the Mediterranean, there is no tradition of staging Attic comedy, as in the West, that could illuminate contemporary aesthetics and politics. Since my interest is in the present, I have decided to leave historical exploration out of the project and to formulate my inquiry as a dramaturgical project. The project aims at exploring the social import of the contemporary Arabic theatre, using *Lysistrata* as a focal point. The play ideally lends itself to highlighting Arabic perspectives on important issues such as war, gender and sexual politics and transgressive behavior. I have attempted to create a forum, allowing Arab artists and intellectuals to speak in their own words about these issues. The majority of the contributions I received come from Egypt, which is understandable, considering that this country is a major cultural center in the Arab world today.⁴ In spite of my efforts to get women to participate in the project most of the respondents have been men, well-established theatre professionals in their own countries. A highlight of the project is that it inspired the reputed Egyptian playwright Lenin El Ramly to write a full-length play based on *Lysistrata*, entitled *Peace of Women*, which was produced in Cairo in December 2004 and led to heated discussion in the Egyptian press about *Lysistrata*, the production, and the Arabic *Lysistrata* project.⁵ In addition to the plays and essays, I am including two interviews, the first conducted in Casablanca with Tayeb Saddiki, a major Arab director based in Morocco who has directed Aristophanes, and the second in New York with the visual artist Ghada Amer, originally from Egypt, whose work relates to *Lysistrata*.

A striking feature of the Arabic *Lysistrata* versions is that, just like the 2003 *Lysistrata* Project, they are chiefly concerned to reframe the play and its main theme, war, in a global context. The world the contributors jointly portray is an international community connected through rapid media communications and threatened by autocratic Arab governments, U.S.-controlled imperialism, Western civilizing missions and the manipulation of the media. Indeed, most of the essays adopt a negative view of globalization, underscoring dangers rather than benefits. The increasingly connected world does not increase the potential for greater democracy. Departing drastically from Aristophanes' playful spirit, the proposals transform *Lysistrata* into a dark, chaotic, or nihilist comedy in which popular activism is either totally ineffective or of limited benefit in stopping the war and in changing society. In content as well as in form the Arabic *Lysistratas* jointly outline a postmodern approach to the play with a contemporary feel and vibrant political relevance.

A common thread of the texts is skepticism over whether the civil war portrayed in *Lysistrata* is adequate to depict the complexities of war in the world today. Participants point out that the Peloponnesian war was a conflict between parties of equal power, who also shared common culture and values. How does one employ *Lysistrata's* war to depict war in the age of the media, or war waged by a superpower against tiny nations, guerrilla warfare, and situations of occupation and clashes of

political, ethnic and religious backgrounds? A strong concern is also whether it would be appropriate to have the weak party in a war taking the peace initiative. The Egyptian playwright, director and actor Khaled El Sawy imagines that the women seeking peace are American rather than Arab, mobilizing to stop the U.S. from waging war against the rest of the world. He reasons: “To preach a message of peace to today’s Arab audiences is tantamount to instructing the victims to accept sheepishly the dictates of their arrogant oppressors.” War in the Arabic contributions is not approached as an eternal problem or as an abstract idea. Participants have a tendency to explore war historically, as culture, time and place specific. In the contemporary contexts they set up, references to globalism are inescapable.

The Palestinian director George Ibrahim concludes that he cannot use *Lysistrata* to portray the war between Israelis and Palestinians, as there are fundamental imbalances between these parties, irrelevant to the ancient play: Israelis have occupied Palestinian territory and tyrannically control the life of Palestinians, who fight a guerilla war of survival against an organized army. Ibrahim’s hesitancy in using *Lysistrata* is increased by the failure of an experiment he participated in to mount a joint Palestinian and Israeli production of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, in an attempt to address contemporary war politics in the region. As he discusses, even though the production had a successful international career, it did not translate well across cultures and led to a misunderstanding of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Concern that closer contact between cultures enhanced by globalism can lead to breakdowns in communication is also present in other accounts. Hazem Azmy, an Egyptian theatre scholar and dramaturg imagines that *Lysistrata* occupies the headquarters of the Arab League, so as to force Arab governments to pursue better collaboration with each other and democratic reforms. At the end of this version the heroine abandons her effort, realizing that she is not at war with governments or with men but with the international media, which make a spectacle of women’s mobilization and distort its message to suit their various purposes.

Disillusionment with the potential of popular activism to end war in the global era is also strongly apparent in Lenin El Ramly’s play, *Peace of Women*. The Egyptian playwright sets the action in Saddam Hussein’s Baghdad, a few days before the 2003 war with the U.S. The women are Iraqis and Westerners and the play explores cultural differences between them on religious, political and social issues. Their alliance is precarious and eventually breaks down. Apart from misunderstanding between cultures, another major reason the women’s mobilization does not work is because decisions about war and peace rest with the powerful, the U.S. and Saddam, who closely monitor the women’s movements overtly, through brutal oppression, or covertly, through propaganda and spying.

In Khaled El Sawy’s *Lysistrata* version of a global war between the U.S. and the rest of the world the ending is also deeply pessimist. Sirens and fierce explosions immediately follow the conclusion of peace, announcing the continuation of war. Stepping out of character, actors sing “the anthem of the world front against war and

globalization.” For Khaled El Sawy the world war he depicts is an outcome of globalization, and popular activism has a long way to go beyond the play to effectively resist it.

In most of the Arabic *Lysistrata* versions the identity of the characters as activists is more important than their gender identity. Indeed, participants approach *Lysistrata* as a people’s rather than as a women’s play. While not directly relevant to gender, these versions are not misogynist either. The failure of the women’s activism is not due to limitations of women but rather, to the impact of non-democratic politics on a larger scale, beyond the individual’s control.

Ghada Amer, and Riad Masarwi, a Palestinian playwright and director, are the only two contributors interested in linking to gender the pursuit of war and peace in *Lysistrata*. They are critical of the patriarchal system and of aggressive masculinity for initiating wars, and credit women for a more genuine concern for peace. However, the gender sensitive versions insist that patriarchy, even though a major problem, is not the sole problem the women’s activism must confront. Patriarchy forms part of a larger framework of institutions working to oppress individual expression. So gender-sensitive *Lysistratas* have a perspective similar to the other versions. Another similarity is that they focus on exploring women’s limited power to counter oppression, as opposed to their dynamism, in achieving peace.

In her version of *Lysistrata*, Amer explores the oppression of the female chorus on many levels. The artist would like the female chorus to be played by men, to underscore that women in patriarchal society do not have self-possession but are what men want them to be. The men playing the female chorus will be wearing hoods, exposing a headless body, in contrast to the male characters whose heads will be uncovered. This choice allows us to appreciate an alternative perspective of male domination over woman as a domination of the mind over the body. However, it also alludes to colonialist perceptions of Western supremacy over the East. Traditionally, the East has been represented in terms of sensual female bodies whereas representations of the West have tended to highlight the higher strength of the intellect, identified with male ability.⁶ On a more literal level, the hood also alludes to the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. guards at the Abu Ghraib prison. So Ghada Amer, through her choice to represent the female chorus by hooded men draws attention to oppression in several ways: she emphasizes theatrically, symbolically and quite literally that these characters, whether as Easterners, Iraqis or female, do not even have control over their own bodies.

The activists’ pervasive lack of freedom in the Arabic *Lysistratas* drastically affects how authors conceive of the sexual strike. Indeed, there is a tendency in Arabic versions to explore the relation between sex and power in novel and more complex ways than in the original. Participants are intent on showing that higher powers, such as autocratic states, U.S. imperialism, the media, and patriarchy control individual desire, annulling the sexual strike’s force and the play’s happy outcome. In

contemporary Arabic versions the withholding of sex does not lead to lighthearted jesting and glee but rather to dark satire about oppression or painful stories of manipulation and abuse.

In El Ramly's play, *Peace of Women*, the sexual strike unleashes powerlessness rather than the life-affirming instinct. In the scene between the Iraqi counterparts of Kinesias and Myrrhine, Kamel, an official in Saddam's government, pleads with his wife, Mowafaka, to have sex with him not because he is desperately aroused but because he has to make a show of having broken the strike with the government. Mowafaka succumbs, after seeing the tapping devices on him but he cannot perform. So lack of libido allows Mowafaka to stay faithful to the sexual strike.

Aesthetically, the Arabic proposals present a very rich gamut of styles for staging *Lysistrata*. A remarkable feature of the pieces is that they envision ample use of multimedia, making use of or references to such forms as the "reality show," video games, and video-conferencing in a style that is contemporary, exhibiting a postmodern sensibility. Khaled el Sawy's proposal perfectly exemplifies this aesthetic approach. He envisions his *Lysistrata*, which is set in the U.S., as a musical comedy in the style of rock operas of the seventies, such as *Hair*. Appropriating a well-known form of the Western entertainment industry he uses it as a frame to create an exuberant collage of dissonant elements. The lighthearted tone of the musical coexists and clashes with conventions of the classical Greek theatre, serious drama, tragicomedy, and devices of epic theatre, parody, clowning and the grotesque to create bold political theatre. The character of the Head of State, a grotesque mixture of the sitting U.S. president, Schwarzenegger, and Roman Emperors strikes a tragicomic note against a huge screen at the back projecting documentary images of actual wars in all their horror. A sexy chorus of Hollywood blonds co-exists with a sober chorus that includes African-Americans and a lesbian couple expressing the city's alternative voices, and acting just as the classical chorus as a link to the audience.

We can better appreciate the postmodern sensibility of the Arabic *Lysistratas* if we compare it to classic modernist interpretations of the play.⁷ The most interesting period in *Lysistrata's* Western production history was the early-twentieth century, when major stagings of the comedy emerged in the large metropolises of the West, such as Max Reinhardt's 1908 production in Berlin and Nemirovich-Danchenko's 1923 Soviet staging in Moscow for the Moscow Art Theatre's Musical Studio. Early twentieth-century *Lysistratas* established interpretative traditions in the staging of the play, which bear central features of modernist culture, such as the focus on city life and politics and the idealization of novelty. In political interpretations of *Lysistrata* supporting feminism or socialism, the plays are invariably set in the classic locus of modernism, the city, and the Acropolis, symbolizing the secular and democratic values that have inspired the enlightenment and modern democracies. The early-twentieth century in Europe was an era of dynamic mass movements for the extension of the vote and a time when more participatory forms of democracy

seemed possible and promising. Following this optimistic spirit, modernist political versions of *Lysistrata* envision triumphs for the activist movements they depict, whether those of women or of the working class.

In sharp contrast to modernist interpretations, the Arab postmodern versions focus on exploring, in sophisticated ways, the power dynamics preventing the underprivileged to express themselves freely and to have political influence. They are also very different stylistically from modernist versions, which emphasize classical virtues such as clarity, simplicity, and economy and aim at concealing the artist's perspective and giving the illusion of objectivity. By contrast, the Arab *Lysistratas* create collages of multiple references, which highlight subjectivity, individual choice and character. Authors openly appropriate *Lysistrata* and feel free to pick and choose anything that suits them to relate the play's story in their own ways. Of course this approach may not only relate to contemporary thinking but also to the fact that Arab participants feel less burdened by *Lysistrata's* weight as a Western classic.

In a recent editorial in *The New York Times*, Thomas Friedman celebrated what he perceived as significant signs that democratic changes are underway in Arab countries, pointing to elections in Iraq and the mass demonstrations in Lebanon, which he compared to the falling of the Berlin Wall. He concludes, "the spreading virus that things can change and I can make a difference" is the most important thing happening in the Arab world today.⁸ Following the perspective of the Bush administration and a current trend in the U.S. mainstream media he is anxious to credit the U.S. and the war against Iraq for having energized the people to stand up against dictatorial Arab governments. The Arab *Lysistratas* tell a different story about popular activism. In the alternative picture they present, dangers to democracy come not just from Arab autocratic governments, as the U.S. mainstream would have us believe, but also from the U.S. itself as a superpower with a hypocritical mission to free the Arab people and to democratize Arab nations by force. The Arabic versions emphasize the marginal status of *Lysistrata's* activist characters and tell their stories in thoughtful, critical, ironic, and at the same time compassionate ways. In this sense, they appropriate Aristophanes as a political author of postcolonial or alternative views, that is, as an author going against the mainstream, or the Western mainstream. The great journalist and free thinker I. F. Stone had characterized Aristophanes as the free press of antiquity. The Arabic *Lysistratas* make a strong case for also regarding Aristophanes as the free press of our own times.

GHADA AMER

Interviewed by Marina Kotzamani

An internationally-acclaimed visual artist based in New York, Ghada Amer has exhibited her work in the U.S. as well as in many countries in Europe, her native Cairo, and Israel. An exhibition of her paintings, *Breathe Into Me*, was shown in the winter of 2006 at the Gagosian Gallery in Manhattan. Amer's work, such as the recent *Colored Strokes on White Diane* and *Eight Women in Black and White*, is known for its exploration of female sexuality. This interview was taped in New York City on July 26, 2004.



I invited you to participate in the Arabic Lysistrata project because I was struck by how clearly your work brings out themes central to Lysistrata. For example, in your works of women masturbating the subject is sexual but it is also political, and the two themes are inextricable. Far from being sexually arousing, the embroidered images of the lone women evoke violence and pain. You place sexuality in a broader cultural context in which women have been victimized. Masturbation then becomes a political act, a response to societal norms. In Lysistrata, too, sex and politics are intertwined and the sexual is political.

Exactly. The central connection I see between *Lysistrata* and my own work is the theme of power through sexuality; that is, how to use sexuality so as to achieve a political goal for women. *Lysistrata* is a gendered play and I am very interested in women's issues, in gender stereotypes, in power and sexuality.

You are an artist who has experienced both Western and Eastern culture. You come from Egypt but you are based in New York and exhibit your work internationally. How has your multicultural background affected you?

You can experience the world as flat or as three-dimensional. I lived in only one world until I was eleven and I thought there was only one truth. This is safer. You learn the norms of a particular place and you abide by them. But then, if you go elsewhere, you see that the norms can be totally different. You realize that each culture has its own norms and you realize this deeply. It's not a question of being tolerant, you feel it in your skin. So you have to be flexible and to be able to shift your norms.

Is there a shifting of norms happening in Lysistrata? The women want peace and try to communicate this to the men. Through the sex strike they try to get them to understand something. So perhaps there is an attempt, at least on the women's part, to step beyond the way one is, the norm.

For me the only interesting character in the play is Lysistrata. She's the only one trying to shift the norm. All other women just follow. By contrast, Lysistrata is able to see not only the women's but also the men's side, and this is why she can resolve things. For example, she understands that the withholding of sex would make men responsive.

Do you identify with Lysistrata?

I would like to be like her. Her mind rules her body; she's not an emotional person like me. She is exceptional in that she can control her sexuality. In fact, she is a mythic character. She can get out of her desire, to achieve what neither men nor women can do because men are for violence and women are too scared.



Female sexuality, as presented by Ghada Amer. *Eight Women in Black and White* (2004). Acrylic, embroidery, and gel medium on canvas. Photo: Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York.



Peace Garden (2002). Installation of a “ban-the-bomb” sign made of carnivorous plants, at Miami Beach Botanical Garden. Above: A general view of the installation. The artist is also in the frame (second from right); Below: The artist (center) and her friends, prepare to serve cups of worms to the guests of *Peace Garden* to feed the carnivorous plants. Photos: Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York.



What do you find attractive in the mind's control of the body?

Desire alone can be very destructive. To be able to control sexual urge is to be able to be a human being. Control of sexuality occupies me a lot. The masturbating women in my works are lonely. They have pleasure but at the same time they want to be in power. They don't care about their body. Masturbation is just a way for them to have control over their own pleasure. They don't have to wait for anyone. Of course there is not only one answer to what's in these works, there are layers, which I like. Nothing is rigid and I can contradict myself, which is fine.

When you read Lysistrata you wanted to do a production. Why a production as opposed to work that is more familiar to you, like an installation?

I wanted to do a production because I have never done it. I like being in a situation in which I don't know where I am going.

You've done some performance work, though. I think your work most relevant to Lysistrata was the political Peace Garden (2002). Can you talk about it?

Just before the Iraqi invasion, I did a huge "ban-the-bomb" sign out of carnivorous plants in the lawn of the Miami Beach Botanical Garden and invited people to see it. I and some friends got dressed in black, with white aprons and white gloves and carried silver trays with live worms among the guests. We encouraged them to take worms to feed the plants. This was my way of saying something about the then imminent war against Iraq. People now in Congress were young in '68 and had idealistic dreams of peace. The "ban the bomb" sign has been identified with the generation of '68. By appropriating it I wanted to underscore the hypocrisy of their peace rhetoric.

Is Lysistrata relevant to the war going on now? If you were to stage the play today, what would you want to say?

Lysistrata is relevant to any war. Through staging it I would want to study, to expose the mechanism of war. All wars for me are the same. I don't see the Iraq war as more horrible than Vietnam or the Peloponnesian war in ancient Greece. Is there any sense to saying that one war is better than the other? As if one death is better than the other? I find this mentality racist. For me Americans and Iraqis are equally important. Death is death.

How would you convey the idea that you are interested in war—and not in any particular war—in the staging? Our past discussions of the staging of Lysistrata have been related, even if indirectly, to the Iraq war. We wanted the confrontation between women and men in the play to have multiple meanings. Besides war and peace their confrontation would also evoke a conflict of body and mind, as well as East versus West. Through the colonial period the East has been associated par excellence with the female body whereas the West with the male thinker. The torture of Iraqis by American soldiers

at Abu Ghraib shows that such stereotypical representations of the East and the West are still current. In the notorious pictures Iraqi prisoners are hooded and their humiliation is focused on the headless body. By contrast the “Eastern” response to the West by terrorist groups in Iraq has frequently focused on the head. In pictures that have circulated in the media, Westerners are decapitated. You had the intriguing idea of bringing out the association of woman-body-East versus man-mind-West in your staging of Lysistrata by having the women wear hoods. By contrast, men’s heads would be exposed, whereas their bodies would be covered by armor.

I liked this idea, but am also troubled by it. The problem is that people’s minds might immediately go to the Iraq war. I am only using the present war as an example. I don’t want to get too entangled in the specificities of the Iraq war.

Let’s talk about the female chorus. You wanted the women to be played by male actors. Can you say more about this?

The women in the play participate in Lysistrata’s plan but are not conscious of what’s going on. They have been brainwashed by men. They are in a male society and they play by men’s rules. The women of the chorus are really men in women’s bodies and this is why I would have them played by men.

I remember you wanted male actors not to play women in an exaggerated or grotesque way. They wouldn’t try to be women.

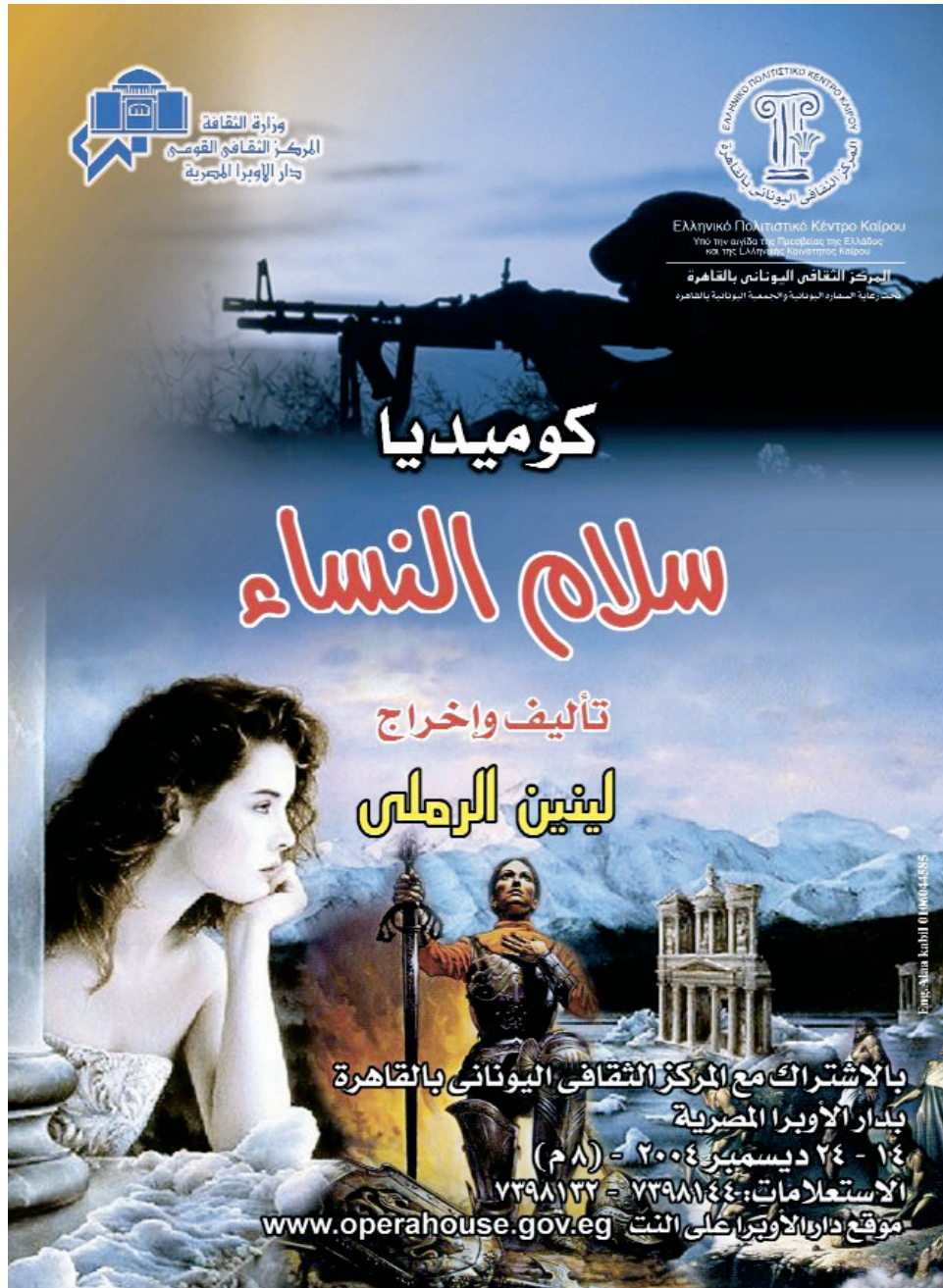
No, because I am not aiming at ridiculing women. If a man plays a woman there is always the idea of ridicule there, more so than if a woman plays a man. What I’m drawing attention to is not funny, but very serious. Besides war, another reason I want to stage *Lysistrata* relates to gender. The manipulation of women in patriarchal society makes me angry and I want to respond by exposing it. I want to say: “look, men, how you behave to women. Look women what you put up with.” I wish to deconstruct the logic of how gender roles are perpetuated.

You mentioned that Lysistrata is different from all other women. How would you show her uniqueness in the production?

Lysistrata is the only woman who thinks and acts independently of men. To underscore the difference in mentality between Lysistrata and the other women I want Lysistrata to be the only female character played by a woman. I see her a little like an Amazon; she is strong, but without the muscles. Lysistrata has brains rather than muscles. She would be very slim, beautiful and sexy.

You’ve mentioned that Lysistrata is exceptional in being able to control her sexuality. How would you show this in production?

In one of my recent paintings there is a woman on top of a man; they’re making love but she is detached, looking towards the viewer of the painting. It is as if mind and



Poster for the production of *Peace of Women*, based on Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, written and directed by Lenin El Ramly. Open-air theatre of the Opera House, Cairo, December 2004. Poster designed by Alaa Qabil. Photo: Courtesy Lenin El Ramly.

body are two different entities and she's in full control of both. This would be a good representation of Lysistrata.

In your production of Lysistrata, would you like actors to be making direct contact with the audience, in the same way the female figure in your painting does?

I would only like Lysistrata to do so, to stress how different she is from everybody else. In my work I explore how you can make people understand through exaggerating. The audience will wonder: "why is Lysistrata talking to us and the other characters are not?" There is a plus and a minus. They will understand the situation better.

If you have a hyperreal character?

Exactly. I'll have a hyperreal character in the midst of hyper low characters: there will be women who are men and the superwoman and there will be a gap between them. It is by cultivating differences between Lysistrata and the other women that I am going to get my message across.

You wanted the atmosphere of the production to be inspired by animation and video games. Is this because you want to create an unreal effect?

Yes, I want characters to be in virtual space because they are fictional. Everything is exaggerated and fake: the women are pseudo-women and Lysistrata is an idealized hero. In my production actors might imitate animation characters. They will inhabit a fictional world of light, in which three-dimensional objects only appear to be so.

Can you say more about the set? In Aristophanes' play all action is set on the Acropolis. Women occupy it, transgressing on a male space. How would you represent the Acropolis in your production?

My Acropolis would be the Pentagon, a space emblematic of all male paranoia with war and defense. Through occupying it, women neutralize it. They don't transform it because they don't have the power. They occupy it for a moment and then they will retreat. Maybe some women get a more developed conscience through their activism, like Lysistrata, and wish to change the world. But this will happen beyond the play. We shouldn't make a female Pentagon because this will be like replacing a male with a female power. I am not interested in the women's staying there.

The ancient Acropolis was not just a male space and a fortress. It symbolized democracy, too. Of course, democracy in ancient Athens was confined to men but it functioned well, as citizens debated and voted directly about state issues. The status of the Acropolis as a democratic institution comes up in the play. In occupying the Acropolis the women can be construed as responsible citizens taking action to benefit the city. I know you disagree with this interpretation of the women's mobilization, since you see the women as a mindless mass. Would you be interested in any way in capturing the Acropolis's connection to democracy in your production?

I don't believe in democracy. I don't know what the origin of democracy is or how it functioned in ancient Greece but the application of it today is problematic. Because a majority of people support an idea this does not make it right. Lots of mass beliefs in the Islamic world are horrible. Democracy can easily veer towards fascism. There should be another way of running the world, instead of democracy. Each one of us must realize that they are part of society and that they must work hard for society as a whole to function. Usually people just let the leaders lead. Cultivating individual responsibility is important. Everybody should be involved with change all the time.

PEACE OF WOMEN

Lenin El Ramly

A leading Egyptian playwright, El Ramly has written over 40 plays as well as numerous scripts for films. His work has been performed throughout the Arab world and has been translated into other languages. His best-known play in the West is *In Plain Arabic* (1991). In 2005 El Ramly was a recipient of the prestigious Dutch Prince Claus Award.



War and love can never meet. A man returning from war is no longer a man, whether he is victorious or defeated. He turns into a broken being or a violent beast. In both cases, he treats his woman as if she were the enemy. He has lost his masculinity and she, in turn, loses her femininity. Then both end up losing their very humanity. And these are what we call the war-maimed.

Labeeba in *Peace of Women*

War, whether mounted in aggression or in defense, is always the outcome of the economic and cultural setup in a given society. Yet, regrettably, war has been humankind's destiny since time immemorial. This is what Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* reminds us of, with the play's focus on politics, sex, and the way both sexes view each other.

Lysistrata captured my imagination when I reread its Arabic translation, inspiring me to write a parallel play, *Peace of Women*, set in Baghdad during the last days preceding the war.⁵ It always irritates me when I get asked about the message of any work of art. I prefer to discover messages through writing plays. Now that I have my adaptation of Aristophanes' work, it is clear to me how the original provides an opportunity to emphasize the connection between war as an external political challenge, and sex (read: war of the sexes) as an internal, social one. The women's political mobilization led by my Iraqi equivalent of *Lysistrata*, Labeeba (Arabic for "Intelligent woman"), may be nothing more than an imaginary situation, yet the issues it raises are very real and contemporary.



Scenes from *Peace of Women*, based on Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, written and directed by Lenin El Ramly. Open-air theatre of the Opera House, Cairo, December 2004.
Above: Kamel implores Mowafaka to have sex with him, kneeling below a portrait of Saddam Hussein; Below: The character of Labeeba, the sober Iraqi Lysistrata, is sits on the floor, listening to two flamboyantly dressed Western women, in drag. Photos: Courtesy Lenin El Ramly.



Admittedly, in our contemporary culture there are religious misgivings about sex that would conflict with the subject matter of *Lysistrata*. Yet we should handle this problem creatively rather than allow it to become a deterrent. We may assign subversive opinions and ideas to characters from a different religion. As for the comical scenes about the erection of men, a possible alternative is to use punning and implicit sexual references. This is an inherent tradition in our culture (although I do not usually resort to it). We should also remember that Aristophanes intended to use sex as a comic and popular means for a political purpose (even though, in my view, the means almost took over the political purpose). In and of itself, however, the idea of women abstaining from sex with their men has been used for social purposes in various forms of Egyptian drama over the past half-century.

I do not expect my government to find *Peace of Women* offensive, as the subject of the play is the war the U.S. led on Iraq, not Egypt. It might not welcome it either, because it prefers to narrowly define Egypt as part of the Arab entity for political or religious reasons, or simply to keep up some pretense.

Peace of Women (Treatment of the Play)

1. March 2003: a park in Baghdad with a large statue of Saddam Hussein. Labeeba organizes a meeting of Iraqi and foreign women and tells them she has a plan to avert an expected American war against Iraq. She persuades the women to abstain from sex with their husbands until the two countries declare peace. The women's meeting includes the Iraqis Mowafaka, the wife of an official in the ruling party; Rahma, a 30 year-old spinster, Lillian the American member of the organization for women's rights, Madonna, a male American spy disguised into a woman; and Thatcher, an English woman with a masculine look.

After swearing an oath of allegiance to the cause the women retreat while we see an Iraqi Intelligence Agent circling around them. He informs his chief on the cellular phone that he will accompany Madonna in order to learn more about the women's meeting. Karima, a young Iraqi woman suggests seizing the parliament but Labeeba refuses because the parliament is just a puppet front like most of the Arab countries. She suggests seizing the Ministry of Oil as the impending war between Iraq and the United States is about oil.

In front of the ministry: A Chorus of Anti-riot forces clashes with a Chorus of Women, mostly face-veiled, holding signs saying in Arabic (No Love Without Peace) and in English (No Sex Without Peace).

A security official orders his men to open the gates of the ministry by force. Labeeba explains that the women seized the building in order to take hold of the money, which is the cause of the war. She also says that the women could handle the financial affairs of the state the same way as they handle it in the household instead of spending it on the war. The official receives commands to mediate the situation

because the administration officials don't want to go to war, even though they threaten to. The women's demonstration accommodates them, as it gives the impression that Iraq is a democracy.

3. Inside the ministry a few days later: A room with a big picture of Saddam Hussein. Labeeba allows Kamel, Mowafaka's husband, who reports to his wife of the president's approval of peace, to enter. Kamel also expresses desire for his wife. He begs her to sleep with him, crying, because if he doesn't break the abstention his chief will imprison him. Mowafaka guesses that there are tapping devices on Kamel and agrees to submit to him. However, he proves to be incompetent due to his psychological state.

4. In front of the Ministry: A Chorus of Women and Kamel discuss reconciliation. They both show traces of suppression. Meanwhile an American citizen and an Iraqi citizen strike up a friendship and head to a bar together.

The Western and local women demonstrate in front of the networks of CNN and Al Jazeera chanting the slogan "Women of the World . . . Unite." A Frenchwoman opposes the face-veil that the Iraqi women wear and reproaches them for remaining silent, even though they suffer oppression, beatings, and rape. The Iraqi women become outraged at the foreigners' intruding on their internal affairs and accuse them of being immoral, alcoholic and heretic.

Karima discovers that Madonna is actually a man dressed as a woman. The Iraqi women request that he get kicked out but Lillian opposes this request on the grounds that he is free to choose his own sex. The Intelligence Agent reports to his chief the new findings. Thatcher says that neither Iraq nor its women are worthy of having their oil treasures and that the war will free the Iraqis and grant them democracy. The chief takes hold of five face-veiled women and orders his men to beat them and rape their husbands.

Rahma puts on an explosive belt, as her sheik orders her to blow up herself amidst the heretic foreign and Iraqi women. She cries in joy because her destiny will be heaven. Madonna's supervisors order her to escape through the cellular phone because the U.S. will strike Iraq immediately. The American and the Iraqi citizens appear swaying because they are drunk and say that if political agreements took place in bars, there wouldn't be any misunderstanding between the two sides.

A nearby explosion sound is heard followed by a louder one. Both citizens think that these are fireworks celebrating the upcoming peace; they make a toast and sing in their languages. Meanwhile Labeeba appears searching in panic for her only son amidst the smoke.

IN THE VERY PRESENCE OF YOUR ENEMIES

A Feminine Eye for the Stiff Arab Guy?

Hazem Azmy

Hazem Azmy is an Egyptian dramaturg and theatre scholar, co-coordinator of Arabic and Translation Studies, The American University of Cairo.



[T]he work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life.

Mikhail Bakhtin

The well-meaning celebration of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* as the ultimate anti-war play may have led some to forget that the war vehemently opposed here is an *internecine* one. In appealing to the two fighting parties, *Lysistrata* is at pains to remind Athenian and Spartan Hellenes of their common cultural and religious heritage, but also of their common *foreign* enemy, the Persians, just around the corner. Exactly how the Greeks should handle Persian men and cities *Lysistrata* never doles out.

A message of global harmony or subversion of the "masculine," war-mongering institution may not be as essential to *Lysistrata* as is commonly assumed. Rather, on a skeletal level, the play is one of an eponymous protagonist who proves "a uniter and not a divider" (hence, the irony in her name: "the disbander of armies"). It celebrates the "underdog" feminine voices (and not just female ones) as they mobilize to "put the house in order," resolving *internal* conflicts and preserving the nation's unity in the face of an imminent *outside* threat. *Lysistrata* presses the vulnerable but priggish male hierarchical institution to submit, for its own good, to a thorough political makeover. If one is to believe its own media, today's Arab establishment is in dire need of precisely the same advice.

For long decades, despite incessant intra-Arab conflicts analogous to *Lysistrata's*, many Arab regimes continued to propagate a phantasmagorical narrative of Pan-Arabism, while dismissing the formation of civil society as a Western-imported indulgence in times of nationalist struggle. However, when Baghdad fell anew to U.S.-led occupiers reinvoking the same overweening *mission civilisatrice*, the darker consequences of oppression and internal defeat suddenly hit these regimes in the face. Scheduled one turbulent year later, the Tunis-held Arab League Summit thus seemed like their last-ditch chance to concoct a reform-based, Arab-grown antidote. That has never materialized. Acting all on its own in March 2004, the Tunisian government saw fit to "postpone" the Summit. Worse still, inside accounts of the preparatory meetings described top-ranking officials as fervently resisting the inclusion of words such as "democracy," "parliament," and "civil society."

Enter Leila, an Egyptian 30-something struggling director and dramaturg who is also striving to save her faltering marriage to a man unable to stomach her more independent mentality and career aspirations. While attending a conference on “Arab Women and Future Global Challenges” at the Cairo downtown Arab League Headquarters, she prevails on like-minded exasperated women from across the region to occupy the building and stage a mock Arab summit of their own: this, she reasons, should be an effective way to embarrass the forthcoming Summit into adopting a real agenda of reform and Pan-Arab collective work. For their part, supporters outside call on all Arab women to start a sex strike similar to *Lysistrata’s* until Arab men rethink their outdated ways. To further taunt the patriarchal institution, Leila also manages to sneak an all-female cast into the building and starts rehearsing the play inside, with women playing the men’s roles.

Jumping at this timely confirmation of the oppression of Arab women, the Western capitalist establishment, and particularly “its” media, paints the situation all too familiarly within the bounds of a narrative of “the white man saving the brown woman from the brown man,” to use Gayatri Spivak’s memorable phrase. No less alarmingly, some TV networks report the life of the women in the building along the lines of a “reality TV” show, with the daily coverage of the insurgency sold on tag lines such as “Arab Girl Power”—much to the frustration of Leila and the flattered excitement of some of her younger acolytes, themselves increasingly indistinguishable from like-minded women in Aristophanes’ play.

As the two planes of action unfold alongside each other, the dividing line between the “real” and the theatrical becomes all the more vertiginously blurred. This pattern not only shows that *Lysistrata* is our contemporary, but also exposes some of its inevitable anachronisms. In a moment of epiphany, while rehearsing “the fleece scene,” Leila is stunned to discover that *Lysistrata’s* vision of the ideal polis leaves the male-oriented hierarchy well in place while failing to assign women any public role beyond their transient mobilization. Having set the world of men right, the insurgent women are only too happy to be ushered back to their private, marital one.

From then onwards, Leila comes to understand *Lysistrata’s* “oversight”: if real, the change Arab women—and men—need cannot stop at inviting the patriarchal system to become more feminine-friendly. Rather, the system and the mindset sustaining it should be banished altogether for progressive and more egalitarian ones. She confides her thoughts to her close assistants and starts revising the text accordingly. Less than an hour later, Fox News reports the scoop: “Leila Tells Arab Comrades Regime Change a Must.”

Robert Kilroy-Silk in Britain and Rush Limbaugh in the U.S. go gaga over the story, while [*New York Times* reporter—eds.] Thomas Friedman seizes the opportunity to remind Arabs of their historic chance to “learn from our experience.” An influential Egyptian preacher condemns her as a sell out to the West (her e-mail is barraged with death threats soon afterwards), while an establishment editorialist cites the

insurgency as an example of the current government's commendable tolerance and democracy. Cornered and demoralized as her every move plays into the hands of her oppressors, Leila tells her colleagues their cause has lost direction and that, as such, they are now under no obligation to stay. When we last see her, she is all alone.

HOW FARES *LYSISTRATA* TODAY?

Khaled El Sawy

Translated by Hazem Azmy

Egyptian Dramaturg and Theatre Scholar, Hazem Azmy is a frequent contributor to scholarly, trade and popular publications. He is the co-coordinator of Arabic and Translation Studies, The American University of Cairo and an Assistant Lecturer in English at Beni Suef University, Egypt. Azmy is also the editor of *The Experimental*, the English language daily of the Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theater and a contributor (entries on Egypt) to *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*.



Setting: A mélange of New York City, Washington D.C., Las Vegas, Hollywood, along with elements of the classic American country.

Time: Now and the near future.

Form: Musical comedy (sometimes teetering toward the tragic)—a rock opera along the lines of the 1970s rebellious classics, such as *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. However, as the action unfolds, the play will also resort to other theatrical forms such as clown theatre, video performances, and epic theatre. The staging will make use of half-documentary film in projection, and will also feature a cubist structure that combines all the icons of American nationalism, such as the Statue of Liberty, the White House and the Capitol building. The multi-tiered stage descends into the audience's space, invoking the feel of the Colosseum and thus engendering the spirit of a popular convention or of ritual gatherings in the ancient cities of Athens, Rome and Thebes. It is as if everyone in the theatre becomes part of an anti-war demonstration taking place in front of the White House.

The play harbors a certain intentional naïveté. We should make every effort to instill in the audience the childlike frenzy that was once the hallmark of the theatrical experience in ancient times, and which allowed intimacy with the opposite sex to take precedence over almost everything else. This frenzy is balanced with deeper intellectual and ideological insights thanks to the chorus as well as to the huge projection screen that is never too squeamish to throw gory truths right in the viewers' faces.

Characters: Our American Lysistrata is a struggling commoner whose Marine husband is stationed at the "Yellow" front (East Asia). A kind-hearted, plump

woman of rustic beauty, *Lysistrata* exudes a guiltless femininity and a natural motherly instinct, along with a biting sense of humor. Her clever plan is intended to both establish genuine equality between the sexes and to end the war. The two causes are interrelated since, as she discovers, they both hark back to aggressive masculinity. *Lysistrata*'s consorts are a mixture of American female types as imagined by Hollywood, such as the Sluttish Blonde, the Sentimental Fattie or the High-Strung Black Housewife.

The two song-and-dance choruses, one male and the other female, comment on or intervene in the action, as warranted, and maintain a link with the audience throughout the performance. The female chorus is composed of poor and down-trodden types, such as African-Americans, and also includes alternative characters such as a homeless prostitute, a lesbian couple, and a war-injured woman Marine. The Chorus of Men, by contrast, is an assortment of money moguls, arms dealers and politicians. It is at once a mixture of comic and devious types, evoking the screen personas of Walter Matthau, Jack Lemmon, Marlon Brando, Jack Nicholson, and Anthony Hopkins. Yet this odd lot eventually strikes a tragicomic note: it is a painful reminder of how this vulture-like breed of masculinity can bring down any civilization before one can say "Halliburton." The character of the head of the state combines, in one breath, elements of the sitting President, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and ancient Roman Emperors along the lines of Nero and Caligula.

The Plot: American men in uniform march into the world's capitals to fight deadly wars to protect the interests of super-powerful plutocrats. Peace-seeking delegates arrive from China—the site of the next war—joined by representatives from all over the globe. The situation highlights the performance's pivotal question: is it possible for "us" to exist without the "other"? Before we know it, the fanfare and fireworks celebrating peace turn into ear-splitting war sirens and fierce explosions invading the audience's space. There is a gradual crescendo of sound bites as rulers of the rich world unleash on us their signature politico-military slogans. The moneyed few have declared war against the rest of humanity. Images of bloodshed, destruction and barbarity run frantically on the screen. The whole stage scene is now in shambles, and all those onstage step outside their characters to sing the Anthem of the World Front Against War and Globalization: it is the anthem of the freedom yet to come.

SOME AFTERTHOUGHTS ON *LYSISTRATA*

Lysistrata is a play about sex and war at once: it deals with the forces of life and destruction in all of us. The issue of women's liberation, which the play raises, is tricky. The liberation of Arab women (socially, emotionally and sexually) is a natural subset of liberating the Arab masses at large from the yoke of their masters at home and abroad. Caught between poverty under oppressive local regimes and racist foreign occupation pretending to bring democracy and civilization, the Arab masses—of both sexes—are as eager as ever to mount a resistance.

I have chosen to set *Lysistrata* in an international context, highlighting the play's universal appeal. To fabricate an Arab clone, by setting the play in our locale is most

unlikely to deliver. Preaching a message of peace to today's Arab audiences is tantamount to instructing the victims to accept sheepishly the dictates of their arrogant oppressors. The war I wish to depict is not one between civilizations or religions, as the enemy today is the oppressive capitalist system, regardless of its country of origin. Indeed, the Arab masses need to unite with their American counterparts so that all can subvert the tyranny of the fat few.

Given my projected play's emancipatory message, the censor would be unlikely to see kindly to it, all the more so because of the rise of right-wing reactionism all over the world.

LYSISTRATA

George Ibrahim

Palestinian George Ibrahim is a well-known producer and the general director of the Alkasaba Theatre and CinemathÈque in East Jerusalem. He attracted international attention for co-producing, in collaboration with the Jewish director Eran Baniel, a joint Palestinian and Israeli production of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1994), sponsored by the Palestinian Akasaba Theatre and the Jewish Alkhan Theatre. The production was presented in Jerusalem as well as in several European cities.



I became acquainted with Aristophanes and the play *Lysistrata* at the beginning of my artistic life; I was very much impressed by it, by its creative concept, its political theme and its call for reconciliation and peace. I was lucky to have seen productions of the play several times in different languages and various styles. Even though I have been very interested in staging *Lysistrata*, I have been unable to find a common factor between what had happened in Greece and what is now happening in Palestine. The Peloponnesian war in Greece involved people of the same nationality, whereas the war in Palestine is a war of survival, whether to be or not to be. Palestinians have suffered greatly and are still suffering from the woes of war that has brought about killing and separation from their homeland. The Palestinians are the owners of the land and the Israelis have occupied that land by force and claimed it as their own, their claims relying on the Torah and the legends that had been written 4,000 years ago. It is even unclear to me if we can apply to word "war" to the pervading situation, for war usually takes place between armies, and Palestinians, as it is known to all, have no army but factions and groups who are struggling against the Israeli occupation army that is equipped with all kinds of sophisticated weapons, including nuclear bombs.

An analogy to *Lysistrata* is that there are several groups of women from both parties who are calling for peace and for putting an end to aggression such as "Women in Black" and "Four Mothers" in Israel. Moreover, there are peace movements in Palestine. Unfortunately, however, all these groups up until now have not succeeded in influencing the Israeli military institution.

In 1994 during the final negotiations leading the signing of Oslo Accord, those of us in support of the peace process embarked on a joint production of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. This was undertaken by the Palestinian Alkasaba Theatre and the Israeli Alkhan Theatre, featuring the Romeo family as Palestinian and the Juliet family as Israeli.⁹ We presented the play in an old barn located on the border between East Jerusalem (the Palestinian part) and the West Jerusalem (the Israeli part). We were surprised to notice from the very first days of performance that the majority of the audience was Israelis who all belonged to the peace movement or to the left party, whereas members of the right group or the extreme right did not show up. Palestinians who wished to attend could not enter Jerusalem because Israeli military checkpoints were everywhere, preventing them from moving between one town and another unless they obtained special permits. We tried in vain to obtain permits for groups of Palestinians from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to enter Jerusalem so as to attend the play. We wondered "where is the peace process that we hoped the play would bring into the limelight?"

Later we tried to show the play in Israeli towns such as Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Akka but none of the Israeli theatres were willing to host the production for fear of extreme reactions by the Israeli radical right who didn't encourage the peace process. For this reason, we agreed to go abroad and show the play in European countries, starting with France and then moving to Switzerland and Norway. We were angered to observe that European audiences received the play with enthusiasm, thinking that peace between Palestinians and Israelis had been achieved and that problems no longer existed. They thought that since we had begun working together and living side by side, our dispute was like the dispute between the two families in the play that ended on the stage.

As a result we were compelled to hold press conferences in every city we visited, explaining that our joint enterprise was merely an attempt to support the peace process, which was still incomplete, and that the sad reality differed from what they had witnessed on the stage. Ultimately we had no choice but to stop this political ridicule by ceasing to perform the play.

Now after what happened and is still happening daily in Palestine, especially as we see now the huge wall that is being erected by the Israeli military forces around the Palestinian towns and villages, how can we speak freely of an Israeli/Palestinian "Women's Entente" to stop this human bleeding? This suggests a balance between the two parties that is irrelevant to the harsh reality of our situation. And, as the play describes, how relevant is it to resort to the use of sexual desires as a means of influencing the decision makers, or to use comedy and laughter as a means of reaching the intellect of the audience? And what audience? The Palestinian or the Israeli audience, or both? How can we reach any audience when we are unable to move freely? Today we are under the yoke of tyranny when the Israeli army totally controls the life of Palestinians. For movement among towns, travel, treatment in hospitals, water, electricity, petroleum, gas, even food, we need to get permission from the occupying army. Isn't this absurdity itself?

In view of the above, I cannot envision a new approach to Aristophanes' play. Perhaps my friends in the Israeli theatres could produce *Lysistrata* for an Israeli audience. The female characters would be Israeli women of the peace movement who would occupy the Knesset building and demand the cessation of the occupation and the establishment of a secular democratic state for both peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, equal in rights and duties. The chorus of seniors would be members of the Knesset, while the men in the play will act the part of the Generals of the Israeli army, an army that has been waging a ferocious war against an unarmed defenseless, people, struggling to secure freedom and rights.

If I were to produce *Lysistrata* for a Palestinian audience, I would present it without any alteration, featuring the war that was going on in Greece at that time. This would allow the Palestinians absolute freedom to derive any message from the play.

LAYLA

Riad Masarwi

The Palestinian theatre director and playwright, Riad Masarwi resides in Nazareth, Israel, where he is the director of the City Galley of Nazareth. He has directed the *Ninth Wave* (1990), a textless production on the intifada, and has participated in writing the collaborative play *Imagining the Other*, directed by Joseph Chaikin (1982).



When we think about how *Lysistrata* can be relevant to the Arab reality today, we have to take into account the situation of the Arab people, and especially of the Arab women, who for centuries have been under a double persecution by the authorities and by men.

Women's freedom threatens state authority in the Arabic world. No wonder that the illiteracy of the women in Saudi Arabia is 80 percent and women are forbidden to drive a car. The Arabic world is full of paradoxes: the oppression of women and illiteracy in daily life co-exists with globalization, technology, and the postmodern, leading to an impasse. Clearly the West benefits from this situation and so does fundamentalism.

Could the Arabic reality create a modern *Lysistrata*? Could this heroine mobilize the women of the world, including the Jewish women? Would it be essential that she leads the struggle as a woman or as an Arab? In an attempt to answer these questions, we have created a story of the Arab *Lysistrata*, Layla.

Layla is an Iraqi anthropology student who researches the life of the tribes in the Iraqi desert. There she falls in love with a storyteller who recounts tales of heroism from Arabic history, such as the story of Saladin, who liberated Jerusalem from the Christian occupation. Layla convinces the storyteller to go back to Baghdad with

her, arguing that city dwellers are in greater need of hearing his stories than the people of the tribes. In Baghdad the storyteller ends his tale about Saladin every time with the question, “where is the modern Arabic Saladin?” and Layla answers, “there is no Saladin in this bad Arabic world.”

One day, in a city square in Baghdad, the security men for Saddam Hussein hear the story and are displeased with Layla’s answer. They arrested her and put her in the Abu Ghraib prison. The storyteller proved a coward: he runs away to hide.

At the prison the men of Saddam rape Layla many times, but she is not broken. When the Iraqi war breaks out, Layla is released from prison and decides to lead a struggle against the U.S. assault of her homeland. When the Americans occupy the entire country they arrest Layla and put her in Abu Ghraib again, where the U.S. soldiers rape her many times. (Layla only knows sex through rape—she hadn’t had sex with the storyteller.)

Later, Americans let Layla go free. While walking through a square one day she runs into the storyteller and shouts out loud that he is a coward. The storyteller is about to begin a story but loses his memory. Layla laughs and says: “Hey you coward, can you tell me something about love or sex that I only knew through rape? All Arabic men achieve sex with their women only by rape. Where is love, people? Americans here in Iraq have the opportunity to practice all kinds of sex from raping to homosexuality while we Arab women can’t even express our needs. We women have to act, to liberate ourselves from this slavery.” Turning toward the storyteller Layla says: “Nobody needs tales of old heroism anymore. I will create a new heroism unknown to Arabic men. I am the Lysistrata of postmodern times and I will show you, coward storyteller, how we women can tell a modern story of the life that we want.”

Thus Layla mobilizes the Iraqi women and later sought the support of women worldwide. Her voice is heard globally through the international media, and she becomes dangerous to Americans. In an attempt to destroy the protest of Layla, the Americans bring in Rambo, who metamorphoses into a woman, and advises to Layla to organize a women’s international video conference, hoping to intercept it. At the same time he enlists the unwitting support of the storyteller in mobilizing the Islamic fundamentalist community against Layla. When the fundamentalists try to kill Layla, the storyteller discovers the intrigue of Rambo, regrets his involvement with him and explains the plot to Layla. The heroine succeeds in mobilizing the women worldwide to organize a big demonstration with the slogan “no peace no sex.” At the same time Rambo mobilizes Arabic men against Layla. In some Arabic countries the police attack and kill many women; a big massacre occurs in Palestine and many American soldiers are killed in Baghdad.

The demonstrations of the men in the Arabic world begin to be demonstrations against the war and for the struggle of the women. American women come to Baghdad to meet their men on condition that they throw away their weapons and

the Iraqi women ask their men to do the same. Israeli women go to the West Bank and Palestinian women ask their men to stop the violence if they want love. The storyteller tries to make amends with Layla but she tells him she cannot go back to the old love. On video we hear a song about love without violence; we see a picture of naked men and women making love, without weapons. Layla is the only who doesn't make love. She is watching and smiling in the happiness to find her real love with a new story and a new storyteller.

TAYEB SADDIKI

Interviewed by Marina Kotzamani

The leading Moroccan theatre director and playwright, Tayeb Saddiki is currently artistic director of the Mogador Theatre in Casablanca. He has worked on fusing the Western literary theatre with indigenous performance traditions in Morocco, and has been experimenting with alternative performance spaces. His plays include *The Gala Dinner* (1990) and *The Elephant and Trousers* (1997). This interview was conducted in Casablanca, Morocco, on May 2, 2005.



*How does your work relate to the Western theatre and more particularly to the theatre of the Greeks and of Aristophanes?*¹⁰

I have staged, in adaptation, many plays of the Western theatre—I was the first in the Arab world to have adapted Beckett and Ionesco. But I didn't think I could do theatre without dealing with the Greeks. I wanted to render homage to the Greek theatre as the first theatre that has come down to us in written form. I had to start with the Greeks and especially with Aristophanes. Aristophanes is the essence of Greek theatre, a social theatre par excellence that speaks to people in a very direct way. When I read his plays I find myself in a society, in my society. Indeed, we must not forget that the West was introduced to Greek civilization through the translated writings of Arab authors. For five centuries the West knew the Greek plays through Arabic translation. Our culture enabled the West to understand Greek culture.

To go back to Aristophanes, you see him as a social writer. Do you also see him as a poetic writer?

Certainly. Aristophanes was a dreamer, he was dreaming of a better society. All these utopias in his works are visions of new possibilities. Dreaming is very important. If as a social writer you are not writing about the dream, you have understood nothing.

Is it relevant to you that Aristophanes is also a writer of comedy? Do you have a closer relation to comedy than to other genres of theatre?

You are raising an important issue here. It is easier for us Arabs to work on comedy than on tragedy. I have never mounted the tragedies of Shakespeare for the simple

reason that I am incapable of doing it. I have staged plays by Molière, who is a lot closer to us than Shakespeare; Molière is a Mediterranean author. Gogol is also an author who talks to us as Moroccans and as Arabs. I have staged *The Inspector* and I am very proud of having staged *The Journal of a Madman*. But Aristophanes is special to me in that the structure of his work reminds me of the *bsa:t*, a very old, indigenous type of theatre in Morocco. The word means “entertainment.” In the literary theatre of the modern Western repertory, each play has a theme: in *Hamlet* the theme is vengeance, in *Othello* it is jealousy, and so on. In the *bsa:t* there are 36 themes. There is a comic scene, then a tragic scene, and then a scene of dancing. It’s the only theatre in the world that deals with as many themes in one piece.

I can see how the bsa:t reminds you of the Aristophanic theatre, in which there is a great mixture of themes and styles. Can you talk more about how you have staged Aristophanes’ plays, Lysistrata and The Assembly of Women?

I mounted my own adaptation combining these two plays, entitled *The Charming Sex*. This was in 1967, in Morocco, and I took the production on tour to the Maghreb. I did a free, not a literary adaptation because I wanted to talk about my society, taking Aristophanes as starting point. Aristophanes has written about women who have no rights and this engaged me as a Moroccan and as an Arab. We have an expression in Arabic, “the woman is worth less than nothing.” If you say this, it means that you regard your mother and your wife and your sister as less than nothing. I have tried to draw attention to this mentality, to respond to the needs of my public. The public was extraordinarily receptive. Why? When you talk about situations that concern the people in the audience, they cannot but support what you say, or be against it, and this is what theatre is all about.

You mean theatre is about conflict? Can you elaborate on this?

How did the theatre start with the Greeks? In the dithyramb, the chorus talked about the god of wine but also about the city. Theatre started when someone stepped out of the chorus and said: “I disagree.” The person who disagreed invented theatre. He intervened in society’s problems. We must invite contradiction; there is no theatre without contradiction.

What else is essential to theatre?

The actor. There is no theatre without the actor. Theatre is at the crossroads of all the arts and it’s the actor who unites them in a production. Moreover, he is an interpreter. Once a play is put on the stage, the author does not exist. Nobody exists on stage but for the actor. The actor says: “I speak for the author, I am the scenic design, I do everything.” It’s the actor who is the interpreter of the *mise-en-scène*, of everything. I direct plays but I consider myself an actor above all else.

You do calligraphy and have created over 400 calligraphies over the years. Do you see a connection between calligraphy and theatre?

I have always been a designer and a calligrapher. What enchants me in Arab calligraphy is movement. For example take the Arab numerals: the number one is represented by one angle, two by two angles, three by three angles. There is dynamism in the representation of movement in these calligraphies. Theatre too is movement—drama.

NOTES

1. See Marina Kotzamani, *Lysistrata, Playgirl of the Western World: Aristophanes on the Early Modern Stage*, doctoral dissertation, The Graduate School of the City University of New York, 1997.

2. See <www.lysistrataproject.com> and Kathryn Blume, "The Short(ish) Story of the Lysistrata Project," <www.thaccidentalactivist.com/Writing.htm> [accessed October 5, 2005].

3. For a discussion of staging Aristophanes as activist theatre in Europe see Marina Kotzamani, "Lysistrata Joins the Soviet Revolution: Aristophanes as Engaged Theatre," *Rebel Women: Staging Ancient Greek Drama Today*, edited by John Dillon and S.E. Wilmer, London: Methuen, 2005.

4. I wish to thank Hazem Azmy, Egyptian scholar and dramaturg, who enthusiastically embraced the Lysistrata Project and offered invaluable help through suggestions, enlisting participants, and acting as a great mediator, making Arab intellectuals and artists more approachable to me.

5. For more information on the 2004 Cairo production of *Peace of Women*, see Nehad Selaiha's review "Lysistrata in Iraq," in <<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/724/cu4.htm>> [accessed January 9, 2006] and Lenin El-Ramly, *Salam El-Nisaa*. Cairo: Masr El-Mahrousa Publishing House, 2005.

6. For an excellent discussion of stereotypical representations of the East in Western culture see Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

7. For a discussion of modernist interpretations of *Lysistrata* see Kotzamani, *Lysistrata, Playgirl . . .*

8. Thomas Friedman, "The Beirut Tea Party," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2005. See Neil MacFarquar, "Unexpected Whiff of Freedom Proves Bracing for the Mideast," *The New York Times*, March 6, 2005; "Democracy's Dilemmas," *The New York Times*, March 28, 2005.

9. For more information on the joint Alkasaba and Alkhan production of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* see <http://www.klys.se/worldconference/papers/Eran_Baniel.htm> and <<http://home.nyc.rr.com/annettekramer/VoiceFinal.html>> [accessed January 10, 2005] and David Hare, *Via Dolorosa*, London: Faber and Faber, 1998: 9–10.

10. For more information on Tayeb Saddiki see Khalid Amine, "Crossing Borders: Al-halqa Performance in Morocco from the Open Space to the Theatre Building," *The Drama Review* 45, 2 (Summer 2001): 55–69 and Khalid Amine, *Moroccan Theatre: Between East and West*, Tetouan, Morocco: Le Club du Livre, 2000.

MARINA KOTZAMANI is an assistant professor in the theatre department of the University of the Peloponnese in Greece and a freelance dramaturg. She has published articles on the production and reception of Greek drama in the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Recent work includes “Lysistrata Joins the Soviet Revolution: Aristophanes as Engaged Theatre” in John Dillon and S. E. Wilmer, eds. *Rebel Women: Staging Ancient Greek Drama Today* (London: Methuen, 2005). Dr. Kotzamani was a consultant and translator in Ellen Stewart’s productions of *Antigone* (2004) and *Perseus* (2005), both presented at La MaMa, Etc.