

# Julia Varley

## Nefertari Under Cover

*Before leaving, I went to the suk, the market. After looking at hundreds of stores selling jewellery, wood-work, pipes and belly-dancing costumes, I crossed the road into the part of the market used by the locals and I bought a hijab. I wanted to wear it in a future show.*

### MEANINGS

Some journeys leave a particularly strong mark. They become a reference for thoughts and improvisations; they inhabit memories and longings, or haunt our human hopelessness. Writing helps me remember and try to grasp the often contrasting and confusing experiences of these journeys. After my visit to Egypt in February 2001, I put down some impressions. I returned to Cairo in September of the same year and flew home on the night of the 11<sup>th</sup>. Today, as I read what I wrote, I know my words no longer have the same meaning. If I don't want to be part of a generalised Western reaction and, at times, open attack on the Muslim world, I have to be very careful in choosing how to express my thoughts. While concepts like war, peace and violence become more and more complex, I feel a strong need to speak for the rights of women at the same time as preserving our different ways of being. I also feel more concerned and perplexed about our possibility of influencing history, as I nevertheless continue working and touring with theatre in the same way as before.

### VEILS

The first time I closely looked at a veiled woman was in a fabric shop in Milan. The attendant was happy to pull out the most expensive silk and lace for two women dressed in black from top to toe. In the capitals of fashion, Saudi Arabian women are known for having a lot of money to spend. While they leant forward over the counter to examine the cloth better, the black bib covering their faces fell forward enough for me to see their eyes and mouths. They had a lot of make up on.

On tour in Turkey some years later I was able to see many more veiled women, in different styles and degrees of concealment. Together with the mythical proximity of the old harem rooms of the Topkapi palaces, these women had a strong effect on me, provoking both fascination and consternation: conflicting sensations that reappear each time I am



confronted with a *burqa*, *chador* or *hijab*.

The desire to discover the secret that lies behind the cloth reminds me of the insight that only belongs to the actor who knows the mask from the other side. I wish to get closer to the hidden logic and sense that belongs to the private and protected life of women so different to me. I have met women from many other cultures on stage, where an understanding and communication is given by the actions we share, but how can I meet women who have to hide their bodies and movements in public? When wondering what makes a woman throw herself on the pyre of a dead husband, I can imagine that for some it must be terrifying to suddenly have to think of oneself alone after having always lived protected and as a functionary to another person. What is the value of independence, if you are used to being vulnerable, loving and tied to your family and you are not interested in competition, worldly affairs and political or economic power?

But my fascination for what these women share in their private sphere is always immediately confronted with the brutality of the limitation of their freedom. I see them trip over their long gowns as they follow behind their men, who wear jeans and baseball caps, and eat hamburgers at McDonald's with their faces all too visible. Also for me, the seductiveness of the veiled face has become the symbol for women with limited opportunities to work, study and travel alone.

## TEARS

In February 2001, invited by the American University of Cairo, I went to Egypt to perform and teach. Because of the renewed outbreak of tension between the Palestinians and Israelis, I was not enthusiastic about being introduced to the Arab world for the

first time via a North American institution. But my host assured me that the American University is Egyptian and considered independent from North American policy. It is a private university, and therefore more expensive, and many wealthy Egyptian and Arab families send their offspring to study there. Amongst other things my wish to meet some Arab women determined my decision, and I left Denmark for Egypt.

I travelled only a few days after the end of the Transit III Festival, which I had hosted in Holstebro, Denmark. The Festival's theme - Theatre, Women, Generations - was an occasion to ask questions about tradition and change, about transmission and learning for women working in theatre. For two weeks I had been in the company of one hundred and fifty women practitioners and scholars from all over the world.

In my opening address to the Festival I had talked about an Egyptian film, *Locked Doors*, which I had seen a couple of months earlier while on tour in Paris. Sitting in a small dark underground cinema, I had burst into desperate and hysterical tears at the end of the film. It was about a woman my age, who lived alone with her son in a poor neighbourhood of Cairo. She had separated from her husband who was head of a travel agency, and her elder son had emigrated in search of a job in one of the richer Arab countries. The reality around them was presented by the story of a boy selling flowers at the traffic lights, by images of rich oil magnates and their daughters in black limousines, by a school full of young boys and the friendly smile of a Muslim devotee. There were no good or evil characters, just the conflict of a growing teenage boy who is terrified by his attraction for women and who, with blind jealousy, believes it is his duty to defend his

mother's honour. The film starts by showing the playful and loving relationship between mother and son, and ends with the sound of knocking at a door: the neighbours try to enter the house where the boy has just killed his mother with a knife.

I wept. The realisation that too many women in the world live in similar conditions, and a feeling of total impotence to change this reality, made me cry. Is signing the daily petitions which appear on my email for the women in Afghanistan all I can do, while waiting for "progress" to resolve this terrible injustice in its own way? It is understandable that Arab countries fight to maintain their identity against overpowering Western norms and ways of life, but why should this happen at the cost of women's existence, education and freedom?

I used the example of this film in my talk, because during the Transit Festival I wanted to question how the basic values of the craft can create a bridge between the needs of the different generations, between quality and refusal, grandmothers' experiences and granddaughters' search for renewal, history and hope. Rebellion does not necessarily mean abandoning a sense of continuity with the past, and innovation does not have to follow the dominant rules of commercial and mass media global enterprises. The only answer to my tears was to allow the concrete practical examples of personal efforts to tell their story, and create a space for women to meet and exchange professionally.

## COLOURS

And then I left for Egypt. Little did I know that I would cry again, but this time my tears had a completely different cause: beauty.

The warm and incredibly alive colours hidden in a hole beneath the desert in Nefertari's tomb were only supposed to be seen by the dead and the gods. But nowadays, for a maximum of ten minutes, ten people at

a time are allowed inside, for a total of one hundred and fifty visitors a day. I had already seen many other tombs of pharaohs, queens, nobles and their children in the Valleys of the Kings and Queens close to Luxor, half-way up the Nile, and been struck by the knowledge and artistic skill of our ancestors 3,000 or 4,000 years back. And yet - even though I had been warned that the tomb of Ramses II's wife was special - I was taken completely by surprise.

It must have been the contrast of descending the steps into the tomb accompanied by a group of Japanese and North American tourists, leaving behind the blinding sand and stone and sun of the desert and the cameras and postcards of the outside world. The density of the colours jumped off the walls at me; greens and oranges I had never seen before. I had to hold my hand in front of my mouth and stand very still while tears started falling. I had never had such a reaction before and I was not aware that I could be moved to tears from looking at paintings. I was only in the first room. After some minutes I gained courage, and went closer to one of the columns to look into the next room while descending more steps. I repeatedly thought that I had never in my life seen anything so beautiful. First I saw the colours and later the shapes, with Nefertari in her white dress, the flowers, feathers, jaguar skins, the cows and bull. Nefertari stood proudly, stepping forward, lovely, with her neat body looked after in every detail, and her face and extended black eyes containing so much wisdom and curiosity.

I had been told that all the temples were once painted in colours and that when a pharaoh died they were abandoned and slowly they filled with sand carried by the wind from the desert. Incredibly grateful for what I had experienced, all I could do was thank the guide - a man from Nubia, the region turned into a lake by the dam on top

of Aswan.

The guide had told me that he could no longer go back to the homes and tombs of his family, as they were now under water for ever. He explained how the rhythm of life in Egypt changed when it was no longer regulated by the seasonal floods of the Nile, and how the temple of Abou Simbel was saved by moving it stone by stone to a higher hill.

All this happened only some fifty years ago. I was witnessing a 4,000-year-old heritage together with a 50-year-old radical change. Continuing my tour, I reflected upon what determines such drastic decline in countries so rich in culture and assets, and why we are no longer able to make colours of the quality of thousands of years ago if we can send people to the moon. No scientist has been able to discover the secret of those colours. Does this mean that quality of that kind is no longer essential in our lives today?

## CLOTHES

Tourism provides one of the main incomes for Egypt, and the many tourists bring their everyday behaviour into the country at the same time as their money. In villages where a woman's face should not be seen by men other than those of her family and where a man and woman can touch only if they are married, European, American and Japanese girls and boys hold hands, embrace and kiss publicly, and men and women of all ages wear shorts and skimpy T-shirts. I imagined myself suddenly landing in an Arab country coming from Rio de Janeiro where people go around the town in bathing suits. It is a real cultural shock.

When I was off the main tourist track, I found myself automatically covering my head, arms and legs. I did not want to seem provocative. There I saw some beautiful women; their veils were often transparent and some of the black cloaks covering their coloured dresses were made of lace. Their eyes shone

brightly. It seemed to me that the choice of following a tradition in their way of dressing and behaving did not deny any of their worth. But in Cairo, the big cosmopolitan city where I no longer felt the need to cover myself, the women I saw in the underground and in popular neighbourhoods, seemed to have lost their shape, their interest, their pride, as if attempting to delete their presence. Their facial skin looked grey. Not seeing their hair, their necks and half of their foreheads made them seem ugly to me. How much is a sensation of beauty culturally determined? Does an archetypal aesthetic sense that naturally allows us to appreciate flowers and jewellery exist? Is the individuality I value so much in theatre always important? I asked myself these questions while walking along the streets in Cairo.

I was told that women working in government offices thirty years ago wore sleeveless cotton tops, while nowadays they all wear a scarf and synthetic dark shirts with long sleeves. The choice is no longer dictated by a tradition, but it is ideological, religious and political, a consequence of the 1967 defeat, when Israel won the war. It is a reaction to the values that by contrast are present everywhere, in the advertising on the walls, in television commercials, and in the lifestyle of the rich who eat out in expensive French restaurants at luxury hotels. It is logical that many women prefer to be considered as persons of principle who defend religious and moral doctrines, thus gaining personal recognition and even independence, although this is done at the cost of freedom in general.

## CONTRACTS

During the same period that I was in Egypt, the Argentine actress Ana Woolf had been invited to the International Theatre Festival of Tehran, in Iran, with *Seeds of Memory*, a performance I directed. I had asked Ana to write out a contract specifying that she would

use her costume (a short sleeved dress just covering the knees) and wear her hair loose (later putting on the white scarf of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo to indicate a change of character). As the Iranians had seen the video before inviting her, Ana did not think such a clause was necessary. She was surprised when the organisers of the Festival wrote back saying that during the performance the actress would have to wear a long baggy dress which totally concealed her legs and arms and a scarf that completely covered her hair. They also suggested finding a hat to show the change of character. They would cover travel expenses and were obviously interested in having the production, as it had already been announced in the programme. After some exchanges by letter explaining the reasons of principle with which both Ana and the Iranians could not comply, the performance in Tehran was cancelled.

In Cairo I met Nehad Selaiha, a theatre critic who had just returned from the same festival in Iran. Nehad, while commenting on some differences in their performance norms, mentioned that Egypt is generally considered to be a liberal Arab state, the place Saudi Arabian men visit to go to theatre and see belly-dancing. Unlike other countries, here in Egypt - although it is not generally approved of - men and women can touch on stage; a woman can dance and sing solo, and wear costumes with uncovered legs, arms and stomach.

## **THEATRE**

When I was not performing myself, I went to see some Egyptian shows, and discovered a different aspect of what I had seen in the museums and in the streets.

The first Egyptian performance I saw was a modern dance duo. The effect of a nice dark woman, in a short red skirt, on stage, was suddenly astounding. I felt so relieved at seeing a beautiful strong woman moving

powerfully and demonstrating her own will! Karina Mansour, the dancer and choreographer of the performance, had received funding for this production a year before and had been able to present it publicly only once. She was very thankful to the foreign visit because it had meant that the director of the National Theatre (Hoda Wasfi - a woman), not knowing what to show from the local repertory, had called her to perform with a day's notice.

In the same theatre - an old Italian style opera building with the sound of the *muezzin* calling to prayer coming through the backstage wall - I saw an amateur group from a socially marginalised neighbourhood. About fifty people of all ages came storming in from the back of the audience and then presented a story where the great Arab hero Saladin returns in modern times to be arrested by the police. At the end of the performance an Israeli flag was torn to pieces as a little boy lifted the Palestinian flag. The Israeli flag was supposed to have been burnt, but Hoda Wasfi did not allow this because of safety regulations.

Another evening I went to see a commercial show. The performance was scheduled for nine, but it started at ten, just after the foreign visitors (I was among them) and the main theatre critic sat in the audience still holding cups of coffee, having left the director's office with its sofas, posters of stars and enormous desk with artificial roses. The audience was full of families with children, men in European clothes and women with their heads covered. It looked like a very big cinema of the old days. Theatre in Europe some centuries ago must have been like this. Spectators were drinking, eating, talking, shouting, exchanging dialogue with the actors, clapping, booing, getting up, sleeping...

Like the other show, this performance also started with a lot of music and everybody

on stage. The cast included ten belly dancers (most of whom were Russian blondes), eight stars (television actors, amongst whom the director's wife was particularly appreciated because of her shiny and provocative costumes), and many odd attractions (a giant with enormous hands, a dwarf, two very old men, an obese man dressed up as a woman...). The performance lasted until two in the morning. The story was about a couple getting married, the new husband getting into trouble with the police and emigrating to the USA and then returning, to make a vibrantly patriotic speech about the decline of Egypt, on top of an enormous reproduction of the Sphinx.

It was striking to see how the dramaturgical construction of both the amateur and commercial productions was similar. First come the attraction scenes, where men and women play together, with plenty of movement, noise, gaiety and sexual titillation. Then the story develops, showing the corruption of the lower stratas of the government and the reaction of the heroes. This part of the performance is full of satire and the actors improvise a lot and exchange remarks with the spectators. The women slowly disappear from the stage as the story develops to deliver the message. The greatness of an Egypt of the past is presented, and the present is criticised. Then comes a scene where the heroes are killed or submit to Israeli aggression, and the women in correct traditional attire come to cry and pray for the dead. At the end a sense of pride and dignity is re-established by declaring solidarity with the Palestinian cause, and with the female and male actors taking the applause separately.

Women on stage play two quite separate roles: they are objects of sexual desire or defenders of traditional values. The same woman can pass from one to the other, but the two are never mixed. This reflects the reality of daily life where the behaviour of earnest women should follow the sanctioned

Muslim precepts, while women who want to enjoy life, be independent and travel abroad are rewarded by being allowed to smoke the *narguilé* water pipe, and wear make-up, high-heeled shoes and mini-skirts. Freedom consists of the choice between these two alternative images of woman.

This paradoxical situation is similar to that which requires government censorship in order to "protect" artists. Censorship makes sure that their novels, theatre productions or paintings, do not offend the religious authorities, getting them into serious trouble. Likewise, student committees in universities go about their jobs by denouncing couples who hold hands in public or professors who speak of Darwinism.

## MEALS

On tour, I mostly eat out after performing in the company of someone local. These new friends introduce me to their context and situation, to their ways of thinking and behaving. Some of the stories I was told in Egypt were frightening. A young director died of a heart attack after having lived as a recluse because he was accused of offending Mecca in a performance. Another actor was sentenced to prison because he enraged the syndicate of lawyers by working in a production where the text criticised a corrupt lawyer. Most playwrights don't dare make plans for the future because they never know what will happen to them, their papers and equipment. Other stories are amusing, like the solutions found to the problem of presenting nudity on stage, ranging from tights to plastic bags, to tape.

One evening, Nehad told me about a divorced woman who wanted to open a bank account for her son. The boy was not yet of age: this meant that the ex-husband could extract money from the account, while the mother could not, even though she had deposited the money. In Egypt, the feminist

movement is again fighting for the rights they obtained thirty years ago, and recently Nawal el-Saadawi, a famous seventy-year-old Egyptian feminist author, has been forced by the religious authorities to divorce her husband because she is supposedly not worthy of him.

"The problem is at the base of the way of thinking, whatever we achieved never dealt with fundamental changes; that is why we have not moved forwards", Nehad told me. The mothers and grandmothers who have defended their authority at home, have passed on their routines with strict rules, harsh attitudes and chauvinism, and their rebellious daughters find comfort in becoming even more radically conservative and religious. Paradoxically, they escape the prison of their homes by supporting political parties that demand the total confinement of women.

#### TECHNIQUE

The workshop, demonstrations and performances I gave at the University had a limited but steadfast group of people attending. Many of them looked at me as if I came from another planet (something which often happens in countries where Odin Teatret has

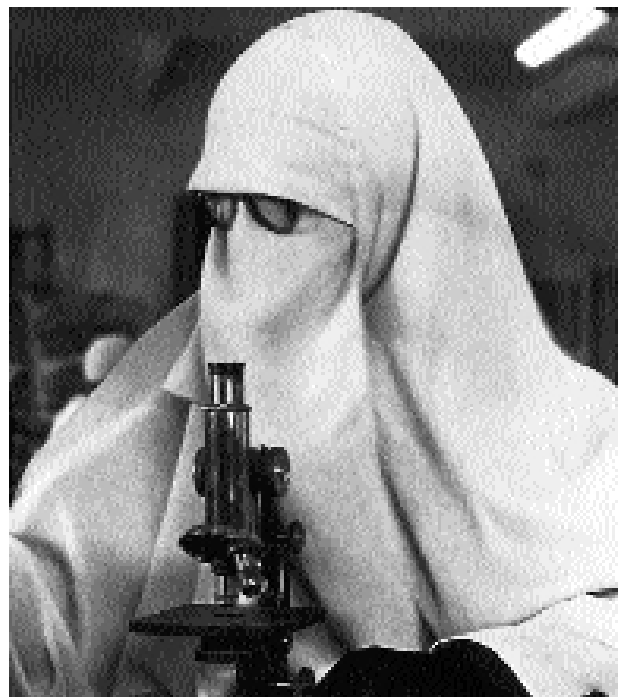
not yet been on tour) while I talked of actor's dramaturgy and technique, and gave practical examples of my way of working.

Answering questions from the audience after a demonstration, and having to show how a dialogue could be established with another actor, I invited a willing spectator to join me on stage. He was from a theatre group, El-Warsha, and he only spoke Arabic, but we managed to communicate using the language of our bodies. I had heard that his group had developed its own style based on traditional storytelling, stick-dance and shadow play. They also attempted a different solution to the question of speaking Arabic in their productions by mixing everyday spoken language with the literary written language normally used in plays.

I visited their "theatre" some days later. It was an apartment on the top floor of a building in the centre of Cairo. Chairs were placed all around the living room, where we sat to hear an eighty-year-old master recite a story together with the young members of the group. The storytelling, done alone and in chorus, sounded like complex singing to me; it was accompanied by an orchestra of old



Nefertari



A zoology student in Cairo Photo: Abbas

men playing different kinds of flute, chord instruments and drums. It was fascinating to see how this group brought old and new generations together, and how the interest they had shown in the traditional arts had allowed these to flourish, by convincing old masters to pass on their craft to apprentices who are now teaching in turn. I was happy to see that both the women and the men of the group danced the stick dance, sang solos and accompanied the storyteller.

### CONTRADICTIONS

The more I got to know, the more I wanted to meet Arab women free of the obligations of male company. So during the workshop at the University, I announced a meeting to talk about the activities of the Magdalena Project, explaining that it was a network of women working in theatre. Although many said they would come, none of the few women who attended the meeting were pure Egyptian; they either belonged to families who were half-foreign or they were visitors. I left Egypt knowing I would have to travel again if I wanted to meet veiled women and let some of the contradictory thoughts they provoke in me be dispelled by giving them faces and personal histories.

Before leaving, I went to the *suk*, the market. After looking at hundreds of stores selling jewellery, wood-work, pipes and belly-dancing costumes, I crossed the road into the part of the market used by the locals and I bought a *hijab*. I wanted to wear it in a future show. At the market, I had seen women covered from top to toe, whose eyes I could not see, intent on examining the prices and quality of red sexy night-dresses and underwear, and choosing between an incredible amount of shapes and colours of bras. I was told that Muslim women have to be decent and discreet on the outside, but at home it is their duty to be voluptuous and sexually available whenever the husband requests it.

At home in Denmark again, I tried on the *hijab*. I did not expect it to be so stifling, but most of all I was not prepared for the incredible feeling of sensuality I experienced when I took the black cloth off and loosened my hair with my fingers. The restriction made me aware of the immense sensual potential of the free body and hair.

Nefertari came back to my mind, with her beauty and pride, and I realised that a theatre performance could be the future journey that might dispel my contradictory feelings of fascination and consternation. In it I could listen to the stories that a contemporary Scheherazade would tell her sister during the daytime, when the absent king is busy maintaining his destructive power. In it I might meet a contemporary Nefertari, no longer under cover. I might see her eyes, hair and skin in the open, without needing to be protected by the sand of the desert or by the persuasions of ideology.

JULIA VARLEY (Britain/Denmark) was born in 1954 and has worked with Odin Teatret since 1976. She has been an active member of the Magdalena Project since its beginning. The latest production she has directed is *Fox Wedding*, a children's performance with Hisako Miura of Teatret Om.