

## Director's notes – MY SISTER SYRIA

Syria, home to the world's oldest city, is now the stage upon which this new century plays out its greatest tragedy. This is not some distant conflict that touches us in the West via TV screens and online images, this is a struggle whose themes and implications reach into our daily lives and dominate our national elections. One of the great justifications of theatre is its unique ability to stage the immediate: what is happening now. Euripides showed us the way forward two thousands years ago, his TROJAN WOMEN remains perhaps the greatest anti-war play ever written, while Aristophanes' rude comedy LYSISTRATA is a close second.

So when I was asked to consider a play about immigration, refugees and terror I reached back to these sources, both of whom place women at the centre of their plays, women who are so often excluded from war fiction but bear the brunt of war's reality. I wanted to resist the impulse to approach the themes of immigration and terror (which perhaps should not be bracketed together at all) through a play set in Western Europe. I have had the advantage of traveling and working widely from Morocco to Pakistan, while few theatre companies have performed to more Muslim audiences than TNT. So I felt comfortable researching and writing about the region that I have known for so many years and at the same time passionate about the need to understand the region's rich diversity and troubling contradictions. So we chose to stage a production that tries to address the causes of immigration and Islamist violence and our own responsibility for creating many of the causes of both phenomena. But we do not wish to create anything that offers answers or takes clear positions. We present a story, a troubling one, and it is up to the audience to reflect on what this means. Our sympathies are with those who suffer, and against prejudice and hatred in any form but we have no clear answers. We are artists not politicians.

The structure of the play is inspired by the film APOCALYPSE NOW and the novel upon which that film is based: Conrad's HART OF DARKNESS. These are journeys into more than geography, these are journeys into the human condition. Conrad's famous last lines are echoed by Marlon Brando in the film: „The horror, the horror.“ Our General Fatima is tempted by this nihilism but it is tempered by Sufi mysticism. So many Syrians despair at the failure of their democratic revolution against the dictator Assad, a failure against overwhelming Russian backed force but also a failure to control radical Islamists who were once allies, and a failure of the West to support those who share our secular and democratic values. Their position today appears ever more hopeless.

In the film and book it is a man who ventures into Africa or Vietnam in search of a mysterious figure who has stared the „horror“ in the eye. In our play it is a woman who searches for another woman, a modern Kurtz, in the horror of the Syrian War. This fictional figure, Rachel, is both open and naive, gullible and wise, caring and rash. She enters an alien world. We have been fortunate to find Arab and Arab / British actors and musicians so we have been able to create this world with authenticity. I never intended to translate the Arabic they speak, so that the audience must share Rachel's experience. She represents us, the Western audience, her cultural dislocation is ours. The cast and musicians offer an authenticity which allows us to experience the Syrian and Refugee crisis through live performance, which is far more immediate and human than any digital media. It has been a privilege to work and learn from these artists and I hope the audience share this feeling.

Finally I should add that the work is carefully researched and is dedicated to the memory of Razan Zaitouneh, who figures in this play. Those who wish to understand the original impulse of the Syrian Revolution should explore her life and work. Sadly, we must assume this brave human rights lawyer has been murdered.

In all the pain and horror of our story there is also life, laughter and above all music. There are many more people in the Islamic world who treasure the inclusiveness and joy of Sufism than the brutal fundamentalism of Isis. This production hopes to communicate that simple but often ignored truth. The refugees who arrived at our door came from this complex and diverse Syria. If we can understand where and why these people came to our countries we may be able to see them in a new light. Terror too has causes, it is not random Satanic evil. If we understand the roots of terrorism then it must be easier to challenge. Yet how does the hand that reaches out to the refugee life raft not recoil in horror from the latest terrorist outrage? The ending of our play is as complex as this issue. We could have chosen an easier conclusion and we invite you to discuss it with us. It would be naive to ignore the problems and failures of integration after mass migration from a rich but distant culture. While we in the West are challenged by Islamic fundamentalism and violent extremism, the vast majority of its victims are living in the Middle East: our brothers and sisters in Syria and beyond.

Paul Stebbings, 2017