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Interview with Nushin Arbabzadah

Afghan Girls Don't Cry SAT 12 MAY 2.30PM

Born in Afghanistan, author, translator and lecturer, Nushin Arbabzadah speaks to Kali about her upcoming play *Afghan Girls Don't Cry*, its characters and her love of language...

Q. Why did you leave Afghanistan?

I was forced to flee Afghanistan as a result of both war and state persecution. We left Afghanistan homeless and stateless and came to Germany via India. In Germany, I studied and worked and from there the journey led me to many different pathways, including currently being a lecturer in Los Angeles at UCLA.

Q. Why did you choose the title *Afghan Girls Don't Cry*?

At school in Kabul, when one of us got hurt and burst into tears, the rest of us would urge the girl not to cry. We would panic, 'Don't cry, don't cry, your eyes are too beautiful for tears.' That's what we used to say.

Tears are pleas for empathy but they don't always trigger it. You don't want to show weakness in a harsh and cruel environment. Some people have contempt for tears because they only respect power. There is wisdom in 'don't cry'. A brave façade protected you from opening yourself to exploitation.

Looking back, I can see that there was sound psychological advice in that saying. It was folk wisdom and it made sense in Afghanistan.

Q. How much of your own background has inspired or spilled into this play?

In as far as I grew up in world of constant clashes of cultures, this includes Afghanistan under the communist rule where the state's Marxist values clashed with the majority of the people's traditional religious values, in as far as I was

influenced by Western feminism and like my fellow Afghan feminists faced hostility for not following tradition, everything. As to the actual events in the play, nothing. They are products of my subconscious, the artistic processing of anecdotes, stories and sayings that I have heard and read about throughout my life.

Q. What was your experience as a refugee in Germany?

What I appreciated most as a refugee in Germany was having guaranteed rights and protections and an education which enabled me to pursue my interests. This was a rare opportunity for which I am thankful.

But the sense of threat and danger didn't end with arriving in Germany. I couldn't speak a word of German when I arrived. Though I had much kindness and support in Germany, but inevitably I also encountered racism and hostility. I learned that my new identity could be taken away from me with just one sentence. I felt I needed a more solid identity, something that no-one could deny me, so I tried to find that in my Afghan and eastern heritage. But that, too, turned out to be contested. On the ground, Afghans like myself are called foreign Afghans.

Q. What attracted you to write for Kali?

I don't believe storytellers choose their pathway. It's something that they are destined to be. My real passion is in literature and culture. I love the fact that theatre is primarily language driven. This is even more so for WAR Plays' staged readings, for example.

Unlike in films, there are not effects created through music and imagery. The effect is created through language alone and I love that. I find it so extraordinary that language is the pure instrument which is used to sum up a character, show their transformation and create dialogues that remain with people and I would say these things drove me to theatre and to Kali in particular.

Q. What inspired the Woman In Black?

I thought about this question and I genuinely have no idea. She came to me just like that, as I was writing. I know about the problem of addiction in Afghanistan and I know terrible stories of weak men who torment their wives with insane jealousy. I have also been fascinated by the truth that some families are such cesspits of envy, hatred and cruelty that their sons and daughters would rather join ISIS than stay with them. I suspect my imagination turned all this into a metaphor and the result was the Woman In Black.

Q. Layla refers to herself in quite staunch terms as a feminist when visiting Afghanistan. How would this be received?

When I met President Karzai in 2011, I was standing at the door to his office when my headscarf slipped. I panicked and tried to fix it. He saw my discomfort and was genuinely surprised that I thought I should cover my head in his presence. When we entered his office, he said, 'in this room you are free'. This was a concrete example of a general trend in Afghan history: that with the exception of the Taliban, the state has always been more progressive than the people. So it depends on who you meet, the part of the state and society that is progressive and liberal? Or the traditionalists and the majority of ordinary people?

Afghan Girls Don't Cry will be directed by Helena Bell.