

These are some exemplary scenes that construe the play's conflictual situations along with its subversive positions and tragic dimensions.

Metaphorical undertaking

All these phenomena prove that Al-Hakim's theatrical discourse is not concerned with an historical subject per se, but with the human implications of such relationships as that between the beautiful woman and the Sultan, who vainly strives to achieve a heroic position via his awareness of his plight and submission to the law. At the end, he realises that such nobleness exists only in simple people, like the beautiful woman who is tormented by the general opinion but firmly resists all prejudice, unlike the corrupt minister and the judges. And when the Sultan wants to give her back the amount that she paid to purchase him, she not only refuses the money but also the corundum that he presented to her as a gift. As a result, the Sultan is shocked into awareness and before leaving says to her, "I will never ever forget that I was once your slave" (176).

The beautiful woman recognizes the disparity between her distorted image in public opinion and her real image that was unmasked by the Sultan during their brief encounter. For that reason, she firmly defended her right to own the Sultan with his proper consent. But when the Sultan asks her about his duties while residing in her house, her answer is intricately informed by wisdom and tolerance: "As simple as that: You are a Sultan during the day. So, I shall deliver you to the State the whole day. Yet when the night falls, come back to me." (122). Through this answer that comes right before the Sultan's statement (I will never ever forget that I was once your slave), and the beautiful woman's declaration (for the sake of the law, Sir), the two victims reach their proper redemption and transcend their painful tragic predicaments. All these compel us to confirm once again that *The Bewildered Sultan* is a metaphorical undertaking that is based upon an ancient historical event. But Tawfiq Al-Hakim transposes it to our contemporary scene with a grotesque tendency that aims at reconstructing the Arabic/Egyptian society rather than reproducing a homogeneous image of such a society.

(Translated from Arabic by **Khalid Amine**)

Notes

- 1 Dr. Hassan El Mniai, Senior Lecturer of Theatre Studies at the Faculty of Humanities, Dhar El-Mehras, Fez
- 2 Tawfik Al-Hakim, *The bewildered Sultan* (Almatbaa An-namoudajiya), Cairo, n.d.. The English translation, 1981, carries the title *The Sultan's Dilemma*.

PERFORMING ARISTOPHANES' *LYSISTRATA* ON THE ARABIC STAGE

By 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 20th century in the West.¹ The comedy has been interpreted in very diverse ways, ranging from interpretations exploring female sexuality to versions in support of political activism, whether feminist or socialist.² In the contemporary period, the *Lysistrata Project 2003* has once again highlighted the significance of the comedy as a classic: an open ended work that can be shaped to respond to cultural concerns across time and geography.

1000 Readings

As part of the *Lysistrata Project*, over 1.000 readings of the play were organized throughout the world on March 3rd 2003, to protest the war of the US against Iraq that was then imminent.³ This innovative project that would not have been possible without the resources of the internet sustains a strong 20th century tradition of regarding *Lysistrata* as an activist play and attempts to reformulate its politics on a global scale. While the majority of participations in the *Lysistrata Project* were from the West, a few readings were held in Arabic countries, particularly in the Mediterranean region. These readings stimulated my curiosity: what does it mean to stage *Lysistrata* today for Arabic audiences? *Performing*

Lysistrata on the Arabic Stage is an attempt to answer this question, drawing on the views of Arab theater practitioners, playwrights and theorists, whom I invited to write, hypothetically, about how they would stage *Lysistrata* in their own cultures. The project aims at exploring the social import of the contemporary Arabic theater, using Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* as a focal point. The play ideally lends itself to highlighting idiosyncracies of the Arab cultures on important issues such as war and sexual politics, transgressive behavior and the position of women in these cultures.

The majority of the contributions I received come from Egypt, which is perhaps no accident 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 in the theater world 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, entitled *Women's Peace* based on *Lysistrata*, which was produced in Cairo recently and led to heated discussions in the Egyptian press about the ancient comedy, the production and the project. In addition to the essays, I am including in the publication of the project an interview on *Lysistrata* with the Egyptian born internationally acclaimed visual artist Ghada Amer, whose work relates to the themes of the play.

Reframing

A striking feature of the Arabic versions is that, just like the *Lysistrata Project 2003* they are centrally concerned to re-frame the play and its main theme, war, in a global context. The world the essays jointly portray is an international community connected through fast media communications and threatened by autocratic Arab governments, U.S. controlled imperialism, Western civilizing missions, the manipulation of the media as well as breakdowns in understanding between cultures. Indeed, most of the essays adopt a negative view of globalization, underscoring dangers rather than benefits. The increasingly connected world adds to the danger of monitoring and controlling the people; it does not augment the potential for greater democracy. Departing drastically from Aristophanes' light hearted, rosy colored utopia 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 *Lysistrata's* jointly outline a postmodern approach to the play with a contemporary feel and vibrant political relevance.

A common thread of the essays is skepticism over whether the Peloponnesian civil war portrayed in the comedy 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, 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 a war against the rest of the world, in pursuit of economic profit. 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."⁵ Participants think hard about which war they want to depict through the drama text and about how the kind of war they want to depict, alters the givens of the original play. In the contemporary context they set up, references to globalism are inescapable.

The Palestinian director George Ibrahim concludes 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: it led to a misunderstanding of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and to "political ridicule."⁶

Cultural distortions

Concern that closer contact between cultures that globalism has enhanced can lead to breakdowns in communication and distortion is also present in other accounts. Hazem Azmy, an Egyptian theater 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 the 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 playwright sets the action in Saddam Husein's Bagdad, 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. The play's ending is bitterly ironic, a clever variation of Aristophanes' utopian finale. An Iraqi and an American civilian drunk at a bar see the first rockets of the war falling and mistake them for the fireworks celebrating peace.

In Khaled El Sawy's *Lysistrata* version of a global war between the U.S. and the rest of the world the ending is similarly deeply pessimist but a little more upbeat. Sirens, fierce explosions and immense catastrophes 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."⁷ 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.

Gender/identity

In most of the Arabic *Lysistrata* versions the identity of the characters as activists is more important than their gender identity. Indeed, participants approach the comedy 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 the pursuit of war and peace in *Lysistrata* to gender. 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, is not the sole problem the women's activism must deal with. Patriarchy forms part of a larger framework of institutions working to oppress individual expression. So gender sensitive versions have a similar perspective 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 Ghada 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, associated with male ability par excellence. On a more literal level, the hood also alludes to the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. guards at the Abu Ghraib⁸ 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.

Sex and power

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 canceling the play's happy outcome. In modern 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 Riad Masarwi's version, Layla, the Iraqi *Lysistrata*-character has only known sex through rape at the Abu Ghraib prison, first by Saddam Husein's guards and then by the U.S. forces of occupation. It is no wonder then that she does not have much interest in sex or in her body. In a reversal he superimposes on the original, Masarwi identifies sex with war and abstention with peace.

In El-Ramly's play, *Peace of Women*, the sexual strike unleashes frustration and a sense of 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 essays is that they envision ample use of multi-media, making use of or references to such forms as the reality show, video games and video-conferencing. My overall impression of style is that it is contemporary, exhibiting a postmodern sensibility that serves well the aim of interpreting *Lysistrata* in a global context. Khaled el Sawy's proposal perfectly exemplifies this aesthetic approach. He envisions his version, which is set in the United States, as a musical comedy in the style of rock operas of the 70s 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 co-exists and clashes with conventions of the classical Greek theater, serious drama, tragi-comedy, devices of Epic Theater, parody, clowning and the grotesque to create bold political theater. The character of the head of State, a grotesque mixture of the sitting US president, governor Schwarzenegger and Roman Emperors strikes a tragi-comic 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, a lesbian couple and a war injured marine, expressing the city's alternative voices and acting, just as the classical chorus as a link to the audience.

Modernism/postmodernism

We can better appreciate the postmodern sensibility of the Arabic *Lysistratas* if we compare it to classic modernist interpretations of the play.⁹ The most interesting period in the comedy's Western production history was the early 20th 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 Theater's Musical Studio. Early 20th century performances 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* in support of feminism or socialism the play is invariably set in the classic locus of modernism, the city and the Acropolis symbolizes the secular and democratic values that have inspired the enlightenment and the modern democracies. The early 20th century in Europe was an era of dynamic mass movements for the extension of franchise and it was also 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 *Lysistratas* focus on exploring, in sophisticated ways, the power dynamics preventing the underprivileged to express themselves freely and to have political influence. The Arab adaptations are also very different from modernist versions stylistically. The modernist *Lysistratas* emphasize classical virtues, such as clarity, simplicity and economy and aim at concealing the artist's perspective and at giving the illusion of objectivity. By contrast, the Arab proposals 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 postmodernism but also to that Arab participants feel less burdened by the play's weight as a Western classic.

Free press

In a recent op-ed 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 compares 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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 an imperialist 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 the play's activist characters and tell their stories in thoughtful, critical ironic and at the same time compassionate ways. In so doing 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.

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 For examples of major sexual and political interpretations of *Lysistrata*, see the following: Maurice Donnay, *Lysistrata*, Paris, Ollendorff, 1893. This sexual version of *Lysistrata* premiered in 1892 at the Grand Theatre (French accents) in Paris. It had numerous revivals in France until 1930 and inspired many imitations and variations in the Western European theatre. Laurence Housman, *Lysistrata*, London, the Woman's Press, 1911. Housman's feminist version premiered at the Little Theatre in London, in 1910 and was directed by Gertrude Kingston who also played the title role. For a socialist version of *Lysistrata*, see Dmitry Smolin, translator, *Lysistrata*, translated from the Russian into English by George S. and Gilbert Seldes, in: *Plays of the Moscow Art Theatre Musical Studio*, New York, Brentano's, 1925, pp. 1-78. Smolin's version was directed by Nemirovich-Danchenko for the Moscow Art Theatre's Musical Studio and premiered in Moscow in 1923.
- 3 The *Lysistrata* Project was initiated and organized by two New York based actors, Kathryn Blume and Sharron Bower.
- 4 Here is a list of the contributions I received: Lenin El-Ramly (playwright, Egypt) *Women's Peace*; Khaled El Sawy (playwright, director and actor, Egypt), *How Fares Lysistrata Today?*; Hazem Azmy (dramaturg and theater scholar, Egypt) "In the Very Presence of Your Enemies: A Feminine Eye for the Stiff Arab Guy?" and Ali Salem

(playwright, Egypt) "Sex, Laughter and Politics", in: in *Rose El Youssef*, 13-19, September 2003 and translated into English for the project with the author's permission by David Wilmsen); Dina Amin (theater scholar and director, Egypt, based in the U.S.) "Lysistrata/Praxa: Dramatic Articulations of (Anti-)War Fantasies and Female Utopias"; George Ibrahim (Producer and General Director, Alkasaba Theatre and Cinematheque, East Jerusalem, Israel, Palestinian) *Lysistrata*; Riad Masarwi (playwright and director, Palestinian) "The Story of Layla, an Arab Lysistrata"; Riad Ismat (playwright, director and critic, Syria) *Lysistrata in an Arabic Version*; Joe Kodeih (playwright, director and actor, Lebanon) "Some Considerations on Performing *Lysistrata* Today"; Tayeb Seddiki (director, Morocco) "Aristophanes and the Moroccan Theater". Unless otherwise indicated, quotations in the present article come from the contributions I received for «*Performing Lysistrata, on the Arabic Stage*,» listed in this footnote.

⁵ See footnote 4.

⁶ See footnote 4.

⁷ See footnote 4.

⁸ For an excellent discussion of stereotypical representations of the East in Western culture see Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Vintage Books, 1994.

⁹ For discussion of modernist interpretations of *Lysistrata*, see Marina Kotzamani, «Lysistrata, Playgirl ...»

¹⁰ Thomas Friedman, «The Beirut Tea Party» *The New York Times* March 10, 2005.

¹¹ For example, see Neil Mac Farquar, "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.