

# An American Take on Iraq

## Naomi Wallace's *The Retreating Country* at the AUC\*

When Yara Atef, a Theatre/Broadcast Journalism senior at the AUC, rang up to invite me to a performance she was doing at the Howard theatre as a senior project on 26 and 27 February, it did not occur to me to ask what the play was or who was directing. I had watched her in several AUC productions over the past two years and have been consistently impressed by her vigorous stage presence, her robust, unsentimental approach to acting and her intense, finely detailed physical interpretation of often difficult and complex parts, well beyond her years or scope of experience. It would be interesting to watch her tackling another part and see how far she has developed. "Lovely. Thanks for telling me," was all I said. The same evening I got a call from Ferial Ghazoul, an expatriate Iraqi professor of Arabic literature at the AUC, telling me there would be a play about Iraq written by a woman at the Howard on the same dates. It turned out to be the same performance Yara had mentioned. I automatically assumed the playwright was Iraqi and this made the project seem more interesting. It is not often that one gets to see plays by Iraqi women, and there are such a few of them around.

I went to the theatre expecting a play in Arabic. There was a big crowd and a crush at the door. I was handed a programme as I squeezed my way through but did not get the chance to look at it. The

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\* 4.3.2004. In English and Arabic.

few minutes before the performance were taken up with finding my seat, watching more and more people streaming in and wondering with growing anxiety how many more that small hall could accommodate and whether there would be enough oxygen to go round. I was also frantically trying to shrink my legs somehow to half their size and stuff them under the chair to make a bit more room for the steadily growing rows of people sitting on the floor in front of me. And all the while I was grappling with a painful wave of nostalgia which assailed me as soon as I heard the old Iraqi songs playing in the background.

The singing faded as the lights dimmed. When they came up again, Yara, in old, faded jeans and a shirt was lying on the floor, straight on her back, holding a hardcover book that hid her face. If you didn't know who was playing you wouldn't be able to tell if the figure was of a man or a woman. This turned out to be significant later on when I discovered that the character in the original play was an Iraqi man called Ali. At that moment, however, it seemed of little import. Just a curious detail. She slowly sat up, trying to balance the heavy book first on three fingers, then on her head, carefully got up and walked around with it in measured steps before flicking her head back and letting it drop. When she finally spoke, telling us that nowadays expensive books like the one she had been playing with could be picked up at the side of the road for next to nothing, I was quite startled. She was obviously speaking of Iraq; but why in English? Still assuming that the writer was Iraqi, I thought that perhaps she had written the play in exile for an English-speaking audience or had wanted to distance her subject from herself emotionally to preserve its dramatic integrity and avoid sentimentality.

As the play unfolded, I became more convinced it could not have been written by any one but an Iraqi. The text spoke so intimately, so lovingly of “the land of palms” and its people and convincingly portrayed their terrible suffering during the period of economic sanctions: how they learnt to live with hunger, watched their wounds festering for lack of antibiotics, lived without electricity, running water or sanitation, relieving themselves by squatting side by side with dogs, and had to sell their most cherished possessions, everything they had saved from the past for “a future in a bucket of slops and potato skins.” And the text did it with dignity, proud restraint, and even humour, never slipping into facile emotionalism. The text, though it spoke directly to the audience, approached its subject obliquely, with great artistic tact and subtlety, processing it through the consciousness of a sensitive, gentle person who loves books, poetry, pigeons and palm trees — things that keep cropping up, gathering shades of meaning all the time and slowly developing into structural, poetic metaphors. This focal consciousness speaks its suffering indirectly, through them, through the other characters it evokes, and by juxtaposing recovered images from the past with the ugly reality of the present.

What at first seems like random recollections in a moment of great stress, the confidential, inconsequential outpourings of a person anxious to unburden her feelings and share her sorrow with us, eventually reveals an intricate, poetic pattern of recurrent motifs, echoes and refrains, telling imagery and subtle metaphoric transitions. Themes are picked up, set aside, then taken up again in a different context and played in a different key, acquiring in the process, as mood and tonality change, dense metaphoric shadings which nebulously evoke other areas of related experience. They are continuously interwoven with pleasant

memories, harrowing memories, funny anecdotes, documented facts, hard statistics, snatches of poetry (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Hart Crane and Robert Frost) and two vivid vignettes of a family member and a friend.

The two portraits pick out the most distinctive and somewhat unusual features of their subjects and render them dramatically, with affectionate humour and loving care, through the words, voice and movement of the speaker. The first is of a beloved dyslexic friend, called Samir Saboura, who was tall and handsome, had big, black eyes, could tell jokes, recognise a book by its smell, recited poetry at the most inopportune moments and walked like a pigeon. The second is of a dear, eccentric grandmother, tall and hard as a big stick, who “drank her coffee out of a Campbell's Soup can” because she loved everything American, was a bit of a blasphemer, had only three teeth in front, sang her lullabies “like an old soft motor, clinking and clanking” and maintained “that song was not in the tooth but in the roof of the mouth, where God lives.” As grandma Lak'aa Faseeh Zayer, as she is called, and the dyslexic Samir Saboura threaded their way through Yara's monologue, sometimes stepping into the centre, at others receding to the margins, they seemed to acquire a physical presence and become characters in their own right, as real as the speaker facing us who conjured them into being.

And because we get to love them, the news of their deaths and the barbarous, ignominious manner in which both are killed hit us with the full force of a cannon ball. The bare, simple, matter of fact style in which both deaths were reported and the eerily quiet and even voice in which Yara delivered the words contrasted sharply, disconcertingly,

with their shocking, gruesome, nauseating message, offsetting its horror. Lak'aa lay in her daughter's arms, "rotting from the waist down" and died of an untreated wound. "Little, pink pills of penicillin were all she needed." She couldn't get them because of the blockade which, the text tells us, also kills five thousand children a month. Samir Saboura's death was more insanely savage and more openly criminal. He had been conscripted into Saddam's army with the speaker. When the Iraqi army was defeated and the troops were surrendering, they walked together, arms raised, towards the American unit. Suddenly, "the commander of the U.S. unit fired, at one man, an antitank missile." The man was Samir and nothing was left of him but a piece of spine "stuck upright in the sand," and a torn, left hand "blown so high in the air it was still falling."

Laila H. Soliman's direction matched the text's economy, emotional restraint, technical subtlety, imaginative flair and poetic impact. The set, which she herself designed, was a small, semi-circular space, almost on the same level as the auditorium, bare except for a single chair and strewn all over with leaves torn out of a book. Some sheets of frayed sackcloth served as a backdrop, suggesting extreme penury and total deprivation, and were used near the end of display footage drawn from various sources featuring Baghdad in the past and present, and distressing scenes of devastation, with women and children fleeing in fear, like shadows flitting across a dreary landscape. There was also a mobile-like construction of twigs, strings and rags, looking like a ravaged birds nest, dangling from above, over an area near the outer edge of the performance space where it joins the auditorium. This was put to ingenious dramatic and poetic use towards the end, creating, as Yara set it spinning, a stunning visual metaphor of

whirling skies full of pigeons, with Yara's head floating happily among them. Though it suggested an exhilarating flight from ugly reality into a world of freedom, peace and happiness, the throbbing, gliding melody that accompanied it live, on Mostafa Al-Saiid's lute, carried an elusive hint of sadness while the fact that the pigeons were only twisted bits of paper, shaped by Yara in the course of the play and strung up round the nest, ironically undercut the sense of joy. The bits of paper out of which the pigeons are made, however, are the same pages torn out of books that we saw scattered around on the floor at the beginning. Joining books and pigeons in one image was an imaginative feat which rendered visually, in condensed form, the metaphoric dimensions of these two major themes and their musical interplay in the text.

The torn book leaves also served as an important aid to Yara's performance, and not just by giving her something to do as she spoke. The way she picked them up, slowly or hurriedly, pensively or frantically, deliberately or unconsciously, and the degree and type of energy that marked each act of twisting them into pigeon shapes visibly monitored the character's fluctuating emotional states, the rising and ebbing of nervous tension and the many turbulent feelings seething underneath the carefully maintained cool aspect, quiet voice, jocular tone and composed features. The movement of Yara's hands as she worked the paper formed an intelligent score which at times balanced, at others enhanced, and quite often counterpointed her vocal score. Besides, making paper pigeons in a situation like that — an ingenious device of Laila's invention — struck me as a highly credible, highly pathetic act of compensation for losing the real object — a comforting, imaginary substitute. And perhaps Laila and Yara also meant it to underscore, more than the text does, the speaker's childlike nature, her

love of play and fun, her innocence, as well as her painful vulnerability — features which deepen the pathos of her situation.

Despite its surface calm, its comic moments and general sophistication, *The Retreating World* was an emotionally poignant experience. I do not know at which point the tears welled up, but I know they kept streaming down my face till the end. And I was not the only one who cried. Some men were even seen with tear-stained faces. As I felt my way out, bleary-eyed and still sniffing, I bumped into Ferial Ghazoul. It was obvious she too had been crying. Embarrassed, I tried to find something neutral to say and heard myself asking her whether this Iraqi playwright also wrote in Arabic. It was not really something I wanted to know at that moment but it served the purpose. Ghazoul's reply, however, pulled me up. "But she is American, Naomi Wallace, you know?" she said. No, I didn't know, I said, and couldn't believe it. "Well, you'd better," she said. "It takes all sorts to make America."

When Laila Soliman kindly gave me a copy of the text (published in *The American Theatre*, July/August, 2003), I found a note describing Wallace as the author of at least four plays and "the recipient of the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize and an OBIE Award." How come I had never heard of her? I wondered. It was through the text that I discovered the speaker was originally a male — a fact the play's programme mentions, if only I had taken the time to read it. It also quotes her saying that she uses theatre "as a site for resistance" (which she certainly does in *The Retreating Country*) and stating that theatre "is as alive and immediate as the issues the plays deal with" (and no issue could have been more immediate than the blockade on Iraq at the time

the play was written in 2000). I confess I was mortified by my ignorance; but it was wonderful to be introduced to a new, exciting, exceptionally brave and fair-minded writer. What would I do without the AUC Performing Arts Department to fill in the gaps in my knowledge?