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LEBANON

Humanizing the enemy: Wannous' 'The Rape'

By India Stoughton

BEIRUT: After "The Rape" was over, or so it seemed, a Syrian playwright and an Israeli psychiatrist struck up a conversation about the morality of it all. Neither man was who he claimed to be. This was fortunate, for had such a conversation really occurred in this darkened Beirut auditorium, it would have been illegal. The audience that descended on the Lebanese American University's Irwin Theater Friday night for a performance of Saadallah Wannous' "The Rape" sat in rapt silence as the brutal events played out on stage. Directed by Sahar Assaf, in a new English-language translation by Nada Saab and Robert Myers, the production is the fruit of a collaboration between LAU and the American University of Beirut.

Performed by a cast mixing professional actors and students from Assaf and Myers' theater production class, "The Rape" wasn't flawless, but it kept the audience transfixed for the better part of two hours.

The play opens with a monologue from an anti-Zionist nonviolent Palestinian activist nicknamed Al-Faria (Dima Mikhayel Matta). Al-Faria is raising her nephew, the son of her brother Muhammed (Raffi Feghali) whose wife has been exiled by Israeli forces.

As she wheels his pram across the stage, she tells him the story of his own unjust childhood, speaking in his voice – literally putting words into his mouth as she urges him to revolution and insurrection against the Israelis.

Al-Faria lives with her sister-in-law Dalal (Vart Awakmian), who's married to Al-Faria's second brother Ismail (Rami Saidi). Ismail has been arrested as a subversive and a threat to the State of Israel, leaving Dalal, the daughter of a rich merchant with little political awareness, to the agony of wondering if and when she'll see him again.

Wannous contrasts this extended Palestinian family with a nearby Israeli one. Rahel (Soha Shukayr) is married to Ishaq (Sany Baki), who works long hours under the local chief of the Shin Bet. Rahel, who is on maternity leave, stays at home with their young son David and her mother-in-law Sarah (May Odgen Smith), a devout Zionist who monopolizes care of the child, telling him violent stories and exhorting him to grow up a warrior who will crush the Palestinians.

Raised by Sarah alone after his father died when he was a child, Ishaq hero worships his commander Meir (Marcel Bouchakra). Along with his sadistic colleague Gideon (Omar Talhouk), he brutally tortures Palestinians suspected of plotting against the state, justifying his actions by dismissing them as subhuman, a threat to be wiped out without question or remorse.

When he begins suffering from impotence, he reluctantly agrees to visit his wife's psychiatrist, Dr. Munuhin (Bshara Atallah). When the doctor probes into the nature of his work, Ishaq initially refuses to be drawn, but eventually reveals details of a recent Shin Bet "party." Enacted on stage, his account reveals how when Ismail refuses to sign a fake confession, after undergoing

extreme torture, Meir orders the arrest of his wife Dalal, telling Gideon and the other men to rape her in front of her husband.

Unable to participate in the rape himself, but worried his colleagues will think him soft, Ishaq is driven to a frenzy of extreme violence, disfiguring Dalal and crushing Ismail's testicles with his boot.

Doctor Munuhin is sickened by what he hears. Unable to maintain his professional demeanor, he denounces the work of the Shin Bet and the attitudes of Israeli Zionists. Ishaq, convinced he has done nothing wrong, stalks angrily from his office.

The remainder of the play charts Dalal's transformation into a violent revolutionary, driven by despair and anger, and Ishaq's gradual mental collapse as he begins to question everything he has been raised to believe, haunted by acts of violence he is no longer able to morally justify.

Born near Tartous in 1941, Wannous performed the remarkable feat of staying on the right side of Syrian Baath regime while writing a host of dissident plays, from "Soiree for the 5th of June," in which he addressed the Arabs' 1967 defeat at the hands of Israel, to "The King is King," which sees a beggar replace the great dictator, disproving the myth of the divine ruler.

"The Rape" was written in 1989 and based on Spanish playwright Antonio Buero Vallegro's 1964 play "The Double Life of Doctor Valmy." It exemplifies Wannous' constant struggle to break the taboos and tackle the tragedies of the Arab world in the wake of the Nabka. For the first time, an Arab playwright dared to present a cast of Israeli characters that went beyond the stereotype of the cruel oppressor.

Wannous died in 1997, long before the events of the so-called Arab Spring transformed the regional political landscape. Written two years into the First Intifada, "The Rape" considers the experiences that shape both oppressor and oppressed, exploring the mentality that drives Israeli and Palestinian alike to acts of violence, and the consequences of that violence on both sides of the divide.

Excellent performances from many of the actors make this an electrifying production. A simple stage setup with a few basic props and a mezzanine area, which serves as Dr. Menuhin's office, leaves the actors little besides their own bodies to work with on stage, but under Assaf's direction the performance slowly builds in tension toward its catastrophic climax.

Matta's Al-Faria was not as nuanced as it might have been, which impacted the power of the first couple of scenes. Opening with a monologue already steeped in anger and passion, her character's emotional intensity started out high and remained there, giving her little scope to react to further tragedies.

A praise-worthy performance from student Awakmian as Dalal helped to remedy this, drawing viewers into the relationship between the two women and the tensions caused by Dalal's shifting attitudes toward revolt, which clash with those of her sister-in-law.

Excellent performances by Baki, as the guilt-ridden Ishaq, and Shukayr as his moderate wife helped to balance the suitably abhorrent characters of Meir and Sarah, ably brought to life by Bouchakra and Smith. Atallah's Dr. Menuhin, a dissident in his own country and a perceived traitor to the Zionist cause, is a sympathetic and complex man who succeeds in conveying the reality that, just like Palestinians, not all Israelis are cut from the same cloth.

By contrasting these five Israeli characters, Wannous' play succeeds in conveying the complexities of the motives that drive not only the Palestinians but also the Israelis involved in the decades-old conflict, while ramming home the point that until extremist Zionists cease to control the country's military and raise their children on a diet of violent propaganda there will be no end in sight to the violence, for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

In the wake of Benjamin Netanyahu's win in the Israeli elections this month, the performance could not have been any timelier. More than 30 years have passed since Wannous penned "The Rape," but its chilling message remains as relevant today as it did during the First Intifada.

In the closing scene, Wannous himself, played by Feghali, enters into a discussion with Dr. Menuhin about the responsibilities of an Arab playwright and the ramifications of depicting Israelis as human beings. Enacting a conversation between nominal enemies that would be considered an act of treason were it real, the two men demonstrate the possibility of engaging in a constructive dialogue with the Other.

In the wake of depictions of violence and brutality that left at least one audience member feeling physically sickened, the conversation injects a note of hope into the play. Only by exploring the depths of depravity and striving to comprehend the blackest of tragedies, Wannous seems to say, can we reach the understanding needed to bring peace.

Compelling, brutal and uncompromising, "The Rape" is a play that will stay with you for a long time.

Saadallah Wannous' "The Rape," directed by Sahar Assaf, continues at the LAU's Irwin Theater on March 25, 27 and 28 at 8:30 p.m. For tickets, please call 01-218-078.

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