

"The Bride of Acacias"

An Appreciation

by

Charles Mueller

*And the people in the slaughter-house
neighborhood
whose flower-beds are bloody
and the soles of their shoes are bloody
why don't they do something
why don't they do something*

How lazy is the winter sun

*I have swept the steps of the roof
and I have washed the window-panes
why must father dream only when he's sleeping?*

*I have swept the steps of the roof
and I have washed the window-panes
Someone's coming
Someone's coming
Someone who's with us in his heart, with us in
his breathing, with us in his voice
Someone whose coming
cannot be arrested
and handcuffed and put in jail
Someone who has given birth to a child under the
old trees of Yahya*

-Forugh Farrokh-Zad (1968)

"The Bride of Acacias"

Thursday 25 August 7:30PM

Lenz Design, 2114 West Belmont, Chicago

Farrokh-Zad-- the character's-- true coming of age, her start of gender-spiritual and sexual identity, is couched in a latent appreciation of her corporeal reality, expressed through her awakened erotic sensibility.

She is wife, mother, lover, daughter. The social and political problems and inequalities of women, the limitations of women's freedom, the ethical systems under which they must be subjugate, and their righteous grievances, if not in terms of cosmic justice certainly in terms of commonsense legality, are not far behind. The playwright's and actor's well-expressed partnership the evening of 25 August was to successfully make such a mélange of intention riveting and chronologically clear.

Farrokh-Zad's collection of poetry "The Bride of Acacias," as rendered into monologue by Ezzat Goushegir and read by Amira Sabagh (I'm not sure about the spelling), surveyed the many forms of choric, histrionic and pictured representations to which the poet's imagism, humanity, earth and fire might aspire. The director's name: Anna

Bahow. She read the stage instructions and provided opening and closing guidance for remarks from the select audience.

The monologue is a rich mine, a quarry and a work-in-progress from which, by the playwright's own remarks, she might render a statuesque play, dance, film, or exploit the current script's kaleidoscopic features into an abstract installation in alternative media.

The actor's fearless reading made negligibly transparent the considerable burden of the script-in-hand; a script heavy in sexuality and weighted words of a highly personal nature, flights of English prose replete with double intention, allegory, and imagination, and poetry-- some spoken in Italian. In images of language, saturate with the community, flora and atmosphere of the East, the script is a rendering, in the words of the poet Farrokh-Zad and the exposition and timing of the playwright Goushegir, the record of the transfiguration of a woman. The woman is both the poet in a biographical sense, and the Everyman of the monologue, whose flowering life of the body and mind describes the arc of all human lives from innocence to experience.

Following the actor quickly emerge the characters of the poet, her husband, his rival her lover, their son, her father, and her important lovers come and gone in a short yet full life. The transfiguration of the poet herself into multiple reflections, like a broken mirror reflecting the dappled sunlight from the forest's floor, figures not a little in the range of characterization.

Her men populate the stage, profiles of creatures ethically morbid and if not empty, veiled beneath an emotional caul of their own. Men are physically necessary to the poet-character, and perhaps-- one may hope-- still necessary in a larger sense. Yet in this setting they are made powerful and potent only by the language of the woman-poet, in her acknowledgement (but never capitulation to) the unjust social reality they own. Serving her, empowered by her, made by her, as poet-artificer, these archetypal but necessary males are beloved, by she whose Proustian reality is made in healing from the suffering they cause in her, only by her experiencing it in full.

Sabagh, the actor of the monologue, embodied the ideal of this impulse. One speculates immediately upon the potential vigorous stagings of such language, considering the full confidence the instrument of such an actor inspires. The range of both expression and control while anchored to the script-in-hand could not have been better demonstrated, and the selections of Farrokh-Zad's poetry, of the highest dramatic quality, were transparently projected for the benefit of an audience who in this reading were intensely interested. Goushegir's exposition of the geography and chronology of the poet's life was managed with a great deal of dispatch, which could pass for elegance. Specific historic context, in the context of Africa, Asia or Europe, lacks, but the crowd was expected to include experts in Farrokh-Zad's oeuvre and biography. Transitions between moments and epochs were blurred, with a minimum of stage instruction.

The "Bride of Acacias" by the playwright's post-performance admission on 25 August is-- as a one-person play-- the servant of too many masters. In the post-reading discussion the monologue was compared not unfavorably to the dance, and an auditor with an imagination for production might see in the lushness of the current uncut script's imagery nearly operatic opportunities for stage effects, multi-media, and a more avant-garde application of dancers, sets, and tableau than might make such a presentation perfectly

marketable. The invariable comparison of the well-made play to well-made architecture may serve here: a successful building may not be the servant of two masters.

Striking, contextually, at least to a white, American, middle-class, conventionally educated internally male sensibility, are the similarities among Farrokh-Zad's struggles with God, father, and conventional morals, and the struggles of the Victorian proto-feminist literati in the English literature of the 19th century. What one might call between 1750 and 1920 the emergence of a nascent feminism in the West features, but does not duplicate, certain aspects of Farrokh-Zad's 21st-century struggles with the Westernization of Islam (or the Islamification of the West-- the jury's still out and one hopes for a peaceful determination), and the flowering of a feminine identity in the East, and a significant evolution in the feminine civilizational "narrative," there. Most readily George Eliot comes to mind, in her titanic struggles with her father and his church, to eke out an artistic and spiritual identity of her own.

Farrokh-Zad died in on February 14, 1967, when her car was struck by an American military vehicle in Tehran, killing her instantly. She was 32 years old. Her vision was ahead of its time; indeed, it appears to one new to her work as prophetic. In her unabashed embrace of erotic freedom, of mind and thought if not corporeally, and her acknowledgement of the entirely human physiological drive to put this, like all fresh consciousness, to task in political form. Farrokh-Zad must anticipate new perspectives in terms of Iranian and Islamic women's identity. Adapting the work for the stage, Goushegir's practical, chronological presentation of the poet scales down the pitch and altitude at which Farrokh-Zad lived the life that resulted in such edgéd and personal words. If one understands the monologue, one sees the progression plainly as Everyman's birth, childhood, consciousness, age, and while such a throughline may seem slavish to the sophisticate, it is nonetheless a reliable and navigable course for audiences.

The hope is that the patterns of patriarchy which insecurely (and sometimes violently) attempted to thwart the new feminine identification with reality's narrative in the Western democracies at the turn of the next-to-last last century concerning the suffrage of women, in the 21st century Islamic East's many misogynisms will be, too, in forfeit of political validity. Offensive and specious as any such comparisons may be-- as if Western Civ remained relevant-- nonetheless the principle of uncertainty obtains as readily in Farrokh-Zad's poetry, Eliot's prose, or Heisenberg's science. The fractal logic of life is, as poetry, is predictable only in its own terms, by its own internal logic, "Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting," as Frost has written. Another New Englander of a more ancient lineage, the Transcendentalist Emerson, might be made to speak in agreement with Farrokh-Zad's deepest conviction, in her wish for love, and human trust, and the comforts of the spiritual: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events."

In the most liberal sense, the propensity of the individual consciousness to take flight, and expand in purview and understanding, is universal.

There are over a thousand varieties of acacia, some are bushes and some are trees.

For the Brotherhood of Masons, branches of acacia, cypress, cedar, or evergreen are still regarded as significant emblems. In describing the acacia, Albert Pike, author of

Morals and Dogma (1871) wrote, "The genuine acacia, also, is the thorny tamarisk, the same tree which grew around the body of Osiris. It was a sacred tree among the Arabs, who made of it the idol Al-Uzza, which Mohammed destroyed. It is abundant as a bush in the desert of Thur; and of it the 'crown of thorns' was composed, which was set on the forehead of Jesus of Nazareth."

The acacia was purportedly the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Sacred to Osiris, it was the wood of which the Ark was made, and the "burning bush" with which Moses communicated to Jehovah. In the Egyptian Mysteries Isis finds her husband's body encased in a tamarisk, or acacia tree, which the King of Byblos converts into a column. This column, still containing the body, is finally carried away and broken by Isis, the body released. Among the ancient Egyptians and Jews the acacia, or tamarisk, was held in the highest religious esteem. The shittim-wood used by the children of Israel in the construction of the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant was a species of acacia.

"It is a fit type of immortality on account of its tenacity of life; for it has been known, when planted as a door-post, to take root again and shoot out budding boughs above the threshold," Pike wrote.

