

# A Public Garden

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My Moroccan acting student, a young man with long, wavy black hair and a wry sense of humor, asked today if I wanted to hear the prank they planned to play on me the first day I arrived. I said I most definitely did. The young men in the class were going to put on long, fake beards, dress up as members of the Taliban and order me to wear the veil. After I laughed and said it was funny, I told him about my grandfather, French from Algeria, who loved pranks too and dressed up as an Arab to greet my father when my mother first brought him to Oran to meet the family. A prank is a prank. During the workshop of my play *The Beauty Inside* at the Higher Institute of Drama and Cultural Animation (ISADAC), in Rabat, Morocco, I translate certain of the play's phrases from English, while my students and the play's director converse in Moroccan dialect and perform the play in Arabic. We join together, speaking in French. It is a strange sense for me of coming full circle, though full circle from where I cannot say.

My first day in Rabat, the director of ISADAC, Dr Ahmed Massaia drives me around the walled capital city past a huge Catholic Church, La Chapelle de Saint Pierre. As we pass its tall white spires he tells me that after 9/11 a large ceremony was held here in support of 'us' (the USA) with representatives from the three main religions of Morocco: Muslim, Jewish and Christian. Everyday I walk by the church on my way to the Institute, past men and women in their different-colored *djellabas* – past white, yellow, bone, and pink

buildings deepened by the North African sun – and think of the three religions joining to support 'us'. Every night I walk back to my hotel in the center of town, past a prominent corner where there is a high white wall. I always think: what is behind the wall? And before I go to sleep I watch the American bombing of Falluja in Iraq on TV.

One of my female students tells me that what bothered her after 9/11 is the derogatory way some Americans referred to Arabs. Another Berber woman says Bin Laden is not a Muslim because Muslims don't kill. My students insist that Moroccans are peaceful. They explain that a few years ago when Spain provoked Morocco by intimidating police on the small Moroccan island of Laila, Moroccans didn't send any military. The French and Americans helped them to resolve the problem.

As he gives me the tour of the city, Dr Massaia mentions in passing that I am replacing a famous theater director who was supposed to come, but cancelled her plans after 'Casablanca'. On 16 May 2003, 'Casa d'Espagna', a hotel/casino in Casablanca (the largest city in the Arab world, after Cairo) was bombed by militants linked to an international terrorist network and 41 people died. Massaia explains that the country used to be virtually without terrorism and he is chagrined that '*islamistes*' are gaining control throughout the world. Islamic extremists from Morocco have recently been arrested in connection with the Madrid bombings and the murder of Theo Van Gogh, the Dutch filmmaker in November 2004. Massaia mentions an employee at ISADAC who became '*islamiste*' and told Massaia he did not want to own a TV because the USA was a bad influence. Massaia tried to reason with him that television is a window to the world and he would be depriving his children of something important without one. Relieved, Massaia says that recently the employee bought a television set. One of my students separately also brings up this same '*islamiste*' employee, saying he grew a beard when he became a militant but was also dismayed by 9/11.

Theater in Morocco is either performed in *Arabe classique* (classical Arabic) or in the Moroccan dialect. The young director of *The Beauty Inside*, Messaoud Bouhcine, a talented graduate of ISADAC, received a scholarship for his graduate degree in directing in Romania, and now teaches as well as directs theater and film; he is also an actor and writer. He told me he would be interested in translating Shakespeare into the Moroccan dialect rather than only having the

option of performing it in classical Arabic. He finds Shakespeare's plays universal and playable anywhere in the world. The Ministry of Culture in Morocco does not support theater, and ISADAC suffers from lack of space and poor salaries for faculty, which resulted in a six-week strike right before I arrived. Messaoud was part of what I understand to be the most successful theater company in Morocco, a non-profit association in which none of the employees get paid, and which is funded through government grants. He is now more involved in television and recently asked to adapt my play, *The Beauty Inside*, into Arabic, and change the location from Turkey to Morocco, for a Moroccan TV station.

The quality of the fourth year students at ISADAC is quite high; from what I can see, they are comfortable with Shakespeare, comedy and stage combat. In the work on my play they do not tend towards melodrama, though when they perform in front of an audience they are less certain. The method they seem to use with Bouhcine is to physicalise the character's actions before building a character. The director gives them line readings, general gestures for them to copy, and asks them to replay the same sequences to help them, it seems, get the actions in their bodies. My play is about an 'honour killing' in Turkey and I am impressed with how they don't shy away from the material, perhaps because they choose strong actions. For actors in their early twenties they seem unselfconscious when they are on stage, not self-absorbed. They are currently preparing a 'mémoire' (40-page paper) based on a play they will stage for their final projects. The students tell me there is far too much work in their final year and they must pay for elements of their final production themselves. They say many of the graduates before them face unemployment. Nonetheless while I'm in Rabat, I see a moving Moroccan film, *Mille Mois* (2003), by an ISADAC alumni-director, Faouzi Bensaïdi, starring a talented actress in my workshop, Hajar Masdouki, and a TV miniseries with the same student who told me about the prank, Abdesselam Bouhasni, playing an elegant Prince.

One of my female students confides she was to marry an Egyptian man, but had to break off the engagement. Her parents believed that in Egypt she would lose her rights as a woman: there would be no possibility of divorce and her children might even be taken away from her. Married men have also courted her and, though in her religion men can have more than one wife, she will not marry a

man who is already married. She confided that her younger siblings are getting married, but she will live with her parents. During the workshop she loses her cell phone in the theater at the Ministry of Culture, and accuses workers of stealing it. The director Bouhcine tells her it is wrong to accuse innocent people and she explodes at him, raising her voice. She faints and then, in frustration, scratches up her face. The other students explain to me that she is under great stress and they hope that Bouhcine will give her a second chance, which he does. She lives in 'Casa' and must commute three hours each way to ISADAC. When I ask her about the idea of wearing a bathing suit on stage for *The Beauty Inside*, she says that to do so in Morocco would be 'vulgaire'.

When Messaoud and I go out for a coffee, he flatly tells me he believes the biggest problem between the USA and the Arab world is Israel, because Arabs believe the USA favours Israel against Palestine. Oil and the rise of 'islamistes' are his other main concerns. He says, 'The US has made Bin Laden – on one hand the scary bad guy, helping to keep Americans afraid – and on the other, a kind of Che-Guevara-hero for *islamistes*'. He is skeptical of why it is so hard to catch him.

Daily as I walk by the white church, I think of when the three religions took steps to meet after 9/11 to support us. And often along the way I see pictures of the new young king, Mohammed VI, who recently implemented a new family code (*mondawana*), which makes Morocco one of the most progressive Arab countries for women's legal rights. It is clear to the young Moroccans I work with that 'honor killings' – such as the one in *The Beauty Inside* – stand outside the Muslim religion. And yet this kind of violence towards women is part of the radical thinking of fundamentalists.

During the last few days of my visit, as I walk by the prominent corner with the high white wall in the center of town near my hotel I watch workmen suddenly tearing it down. They bulldoze the large piece of empty land behind the wall into a flat muddy field: a prime piece of real estate, and I see men in suits with briefcases surveying the field. All the trees along the shady street are severely pruned. A shop owner tells me that the large piece of land belongs to a man who neither wanted to sell it or build on it. The lot had become a haven for squatters who sniffed glue and drank, and they were discovered when an aerial photograph of the property was taken. The city insisted that the man do something with the land and he suggested a public garden.