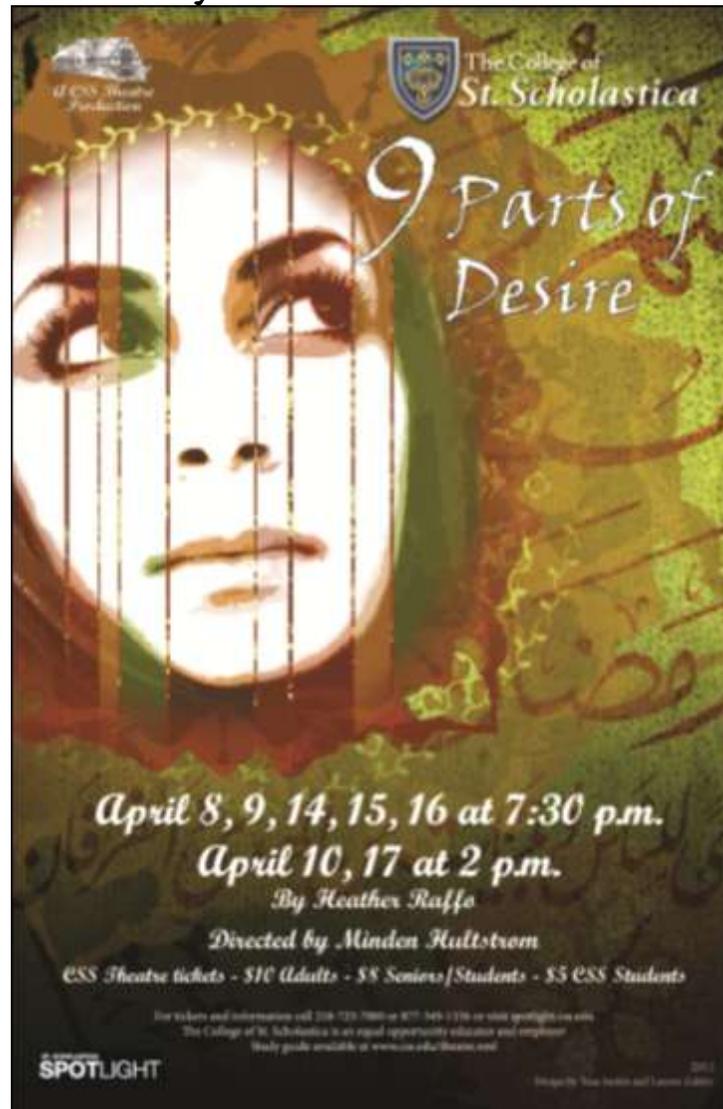


CSS Theatre Proudly Presents:

9 Parts of Desire

By Heather Raffo



An example of how art can remake the world! A triumph! Thrilling!

Study Guide Compiled
By Sher Her & Laura Banken



About the Author

Heather Raffo was born in 1970 and grew up in Michigan. Her father is Iraqi and her mother is American. She received her BA from the University of Michigan, and her MFA from the University of San Diego. She is currently living in New York. She and her family have visited Iraq frequently since 1974. During Raffo's trip to Iraq in 1993 to visit relatives, she interviewed several Iraqi women and used what she learned to document the impact of political oppression on several generations of women. What she heard and learned from the women she interviewed became the nine stories of life and survival in a land tyrannized by Saddam Hussein and war. Heather was inspired to write this play after seeing a painting in Baghdad. The painting was a nude woman clinging to a barren tree. The painter was killed by an American bomb.

The play delves into the many conflicting aspects of what it means to be a woman in an age-old war zone. It is an expression of Iraqi Muslim culture and shows a perspective that many Americans have never before experienced.

Letter from the author:

When I was standing in the Saddam Art Center in Baghdad, I saw rooms after room of portraits of Saddam Hussein. I then wandered up some stairs into a back room and saw a haunting painting of a nude woman clinging to a barren tree. Her head was hanging, bowed, and there was a golden light behind her like a sun. I stood motionless in front of the painting. I felt she had captured something within me. I took a photo of the painting, came back to America and over the last ten years have been digesting this painting and what it must mean to be an Iraqi woman now.

As an American with a father who was born in Iraq, I naturally live on both sides of the issues. The first Gulf War was the most defining moment of my life. I was in

school at the University of Michigan. I remember watching many of my fellow students at the bar cheering the war as it played out on TV, while I was worried if my family in Baghdad was even going to survive. Over a decade later, I think Americans are deeply questioning their place in Iraq, and wondering about its history: Who are its people? What do they want? Why are we there? Did we do the right thing?

So if you could imagine going to Baghdad and getting to overhear a Bedouin woman at her hairdressers telling her secrets about the man she loves and her heartache at why he doesn't love her in the context of the above questions, my play becomes vitally immediate.

I intended to write a piece about the Iraqi psyche, something that would inform and enlighten the images we see on T.V. However, the play is equally about the American psyche. It is a dialogue between east and west. The characters are deeply engaged in circumstances unique to them as Iraqis and yet through their passions seem to answer the concerns of the west. The audience plays a vital role in the show with each Iraqi character speaking directly to them in English as if they were a trusted western friend. I wanted the audience to see these women not as the 'other' but much more like themselves than they would have initially thought. I felt it was important to create a safe environment to experience both horror and humor, but ultimately to see the play as a celebration of life. *9 Parts of Desire* is also about the need for feminine strength as a necessary part of any culture's endurance.

The material I gathered came from hours of gaining the trust of Iraqi women. I had the right mix: I was half Iraqi so they opened up to me immediately, but I was also Western so they felt they could express fears or secrets that might otherwise be judged more harshly by someone from their culture. And most importantly, I had to share as much of myself with them as they were sharing with me. My process was not one of formal interviews, but rather a process of living with, eating with, communicating compassionately and loving on such a level, that when I parted from their homes it was clear to all that we were now family. When an Iraqi woman trusts you it is because she has come to love you and that has been the process of finding and forming these stories.

With rare exception, none of the stories are told verbatim. Most are composites and although based in fact, I consider all the women in my play to be dramatized characters in a poetic story. I liken it to song writing – I listened deeply to what each woman said, what she wanted to say but couldn't, and what she never knew how to say.

Then I wrote her song. -- *Heather Raffo*

Raffo's acting credits (besides the premier of *9 parts of Desire*) include:

- Playing Sarah Woodruff in the world premiere of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*
- *Over the River and Through the Woods*
- Broadway/National Tour of *Macbeth* where she played Lady Macbeth
- *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as Mistress Page
- *Othello, Romeo and Juliet, As You Like It, Macbeth, and The Comedy of Errors*
- *The Rivals*

Characters of 9 Parts of Desire

Mullaya: A traditional hired woman who leads call and response with women mourning at a funeral.

Layal: An artist in Iraq who is a resilient and fragile woman. She is a daredevil with a killer smile.

Amal: A 38 years old woman who has been divorced a couple of times; she is always asking questions and wants an answer to anything

Huda: A seventy-something Iraqi woman exiled in London who drinks whisky and has been smoking for fifty years. She has a keen sense of humor.

The Doctor: An Iraqi doctor who is always desperate to keep her hands clean.

Iraqi Girl: A girl who is into listening to 'N SYNC, and wants to go to school but her mother will not allow it; speaks English better than many others

UMM Ghada: A mother who lost all her children during a bombing. A woman of great stillness and pride; peaceful and dispassionate.

The American: An American woman who is in New York City glued to her TV.

Nanna: An old woman, she is selling anything she can on the street corner to survive and help her family.

Raffo's play *9 Parts of Desire* received many awards, which include:

- Lucille Lortel Award (2005)
- Susan Smith Blackburn Prize Special Commendation
- Marian Seldes-Garson Kanin Fellowship for *9 Parts of Desire*

The History of the Play

9 Parts of Desire was performed for the first time in August of 2003 at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh. Later the play was moved to the Bush Theatre in London's Off-West End where it was selected both as "First Choice / The Best Shows in London" by The Times, and as one of the "Five Best Plays" in London by The Independent. *9 Parts of Desire* next appeared at the Manhattan Ensemble Theatre in New York in October of 2004. The play ran for nine sold out months and was critic's pick for over 24 weeks in a row. *9 Parts of Desire* began touring the United States at the Geffen Theatre in Los Angeles and is currently being translated for international productions in France, Brazil and Turkey.

Reviews

"It brings us closer to the inner life of Iraq than a thousand slick-surfaced TV reports. Yet her beautifully shaped one-woman play is a play, not a stodgily earnest piece of documentary theater, and therein lies its singular force and compulsion: it is persuasive precisely because it is beautiful."

--The Wall Street Journal.

"POWERFUL, IMPASSIONED, VIVID, MEMORABLE! The voices are a study in contrasts: vivid and subdued, sophisticated and naïve, seductive and standoffish. But they cohere to form a powerful collective portrait of suffering and endurance."

--The New York Times

"The female half of Iraq has come to America."

-- Gloria Steinem

9 Parts of Desire is "AN EXAMPLE OF HOW ART CAN REMAKE THE WORLD! In this remarkable one-woman show, Heather Raffo's performance is deft and vivacious; her writing, like her playing, is marked with wit and by a scrupulous attention to the details of character."

--The New Yorker.

The Sunni and the Shia – The Conflict

Shia are the minority in the Muslim world, making up about 10-15 percent of the world's 1.3 billion total Muslim people. The Shia are primarily located in Iran, southern Iraq, southern Lebanon, and Bahrain. The main differences that led to the formation of these two religious groups turned on disagreements about who should be the successor to the Prophet Muhammad as leader of the Muslim people. Islam's schism thus began immediately after Muhammad's death in 632 C.E. Some of his followers believed the role of Caliph – the political leader of the Muslim community – should be passed down through Muhammad's blood relatives, beginning with his cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib. However, the majority of Muslims, who later came to be called Sunnis, or followers of the Sunnah (example) of the Prophet Muhammad, believed that political leadership of the community should be handed to the most qualified person, not through hereditary lines. The Sunnis selected Abu Bakr as Caliph, one of Muhammad's closest friends and advisors.

Eventually, Ali was chosen as the fourth Caliph, but was assassinated a few years later. Ali was killed fighting in present-day Iraq. The violence between the two groups continued to ensue. After Ali was killed, Hussein took over the leadership of the Shia. Hussein and 72 members of his family and companions fought against the Arab army of the Caliph and were massacred near Karbala in 680 C.E. Hussein's death holds a deep sacred meaning for the Shia. Hussein's death is honored every year in a public mourning ritual known as Ashura, where Shia faithful march and cry in the streets, and many flagellate themselves with whips.

During the next few centuries, Islam had several armed conflicts with European Crusaders, Mongol conquerors, and Ottoman Turks. In the 1500s, Persia predominantly observed Sunni Islamic teachings. Upon the arrival of the Azeri conquerors, Persia was transformed to practice Shiite ideals. Persia remained under the control of the Shiites into the 20th Century. While the beginning of the Sunni-Shia divide was violent, over the centuries the two groups existed peacefully for long periods of time. That peaceful coexistence has recently given way to conflict. The conflict between the two groups is most obvious in Iraq since the 2003 American-led invasion and occupation. Currently, the struggle for power between the Sunni and Shia is an ongoing battle.

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