

Heather Raffo on *Noura*

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A Theatre Review by Heather Denyer

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In May of 2016, playwright Heather Raffo spoke with me about her collaboration with Epic Theatre and work with women in New York's Arab-American communities. I asked her about the origins and development of their project. Raffo says, "Epic and I wanted to build the demand for an audience in the Arab American community of New York. ... We wanted to go into communities that weren't going to the theatre, and hadn't thought about going to the theatre, and didn't even find it relevant to their lives. So, we received a grant from the Doris Duke Foundation, and then I went into three different communities." Those communities included a group of older female immigrants at the Arab American Association of New York in Bay Ridge, ten or so younger girls at the Arab Family Support Center in Brooklyn, and about fifteen students in their twenties at Queens College.



Heather Raffo. Photo: CSS Theatre

Participants found the workshops an expressive outlet and supportive community. In all three situations, Raffo led the women in what she calls the *Places of Pilgrimage Workshop*. "This is a workshop I created, where the primary goal is to have participants write their own monologue in a first-person narrative, about a pilgrimage, a journey, a journey they're on." For the women involved, there was "a lot of exploring of belonging and of identity in each play."

Throughout the project, Raffo considered the particular life experiences of the women. "For Middle Eastern women, if you live outside the home, it reflects on the family. You might be sexual. You might not be a virgin. Now you're un-marriageable. Even if the parents are completely down with their child

going across the country to Stanford University, and have been pushing their daughter to get the best grades, these big issues come into play. That even in Latin and African American and Asian, in other communities, it just doesn't play out quite as strongly for the daughters. So there are lots of these subtleties that in that 'Places of Pilgrimage Workshop,' that was all that they wanted to talk about. All the taboos, all the things they couldn't do. How do they pursue their dreams and their individualism in the context of the culture?"

During the first round of workshops, Raffo and director Ron Russell, co-founder and Executive Director of Epic Theatre noticed that the college students' monologues related strongly with Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*. The group attended the Young Vic's production of the play directed by Carrie Cracknell at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in the spring of 2014, and the next year began a *Doll's House* workshop using Epic Theatre's "remix model." This involves taking a classical play and allowing the participants to narrow it down to plot points, then connecting the plot points to their own lives in an original way, influenced by family and heritage and personal experiences.

What developed from these workshops resounded profoundly with Ibsen's play, "The reason why it was relevant to them is that for so many of them, *A Doll's House* is hugely about a woman's decision to leave, and in that case, leaving a marriage. So many of these women have had to leave something like that. They have had to flee countries and flee parents... in quite harrowing situations. And they're making all these incredible connections between Ibsen's Nora's awakening and decision to leave."

The last part of the workshop focused on what Nora's experience might be after the end of Ibsen's play, which relates to the participants' own situation. The students posed the question: now what? Raffo elucidates: "Why they wanted to explore that is because so many of them have had these massive life experiences, and they're now in the 'now what?' time."

The question of choosing between society's expectations and individual choice is at the heart of Ibsen's play and also the central concern for participants. "I really wanted to look at, what it is saying about modern women and how we judge them. I think that's something that we were all thinking about in the workshop. I was watching these women struggle with the same issues as the play, which is how to be an individual and how to be Middle Eastern, and can you be both? Can Nora be an individual? Can she be an individual in the context of her culture at that time? Can she be both?"

Raffo's own play, *Noura* was not originally planned, but rather developed through the first workshop at Queens College in 2014. "Where this play came out of for me, is that I'm middle-aged, and a mother with two kids. I was watching twenty-year-olds navigating *A Doll's House*, and hardly any of them were addressing the motherhood issues; and all I could see in *A Doll's House* were the motherhood issues. ... In our discussions about *A Doll's House*, we talked about things in the script that made us mad. Like 'I hate it when she does this'; 'Why is their relationship like this?' ... you know how you get riled up by things? One of the things I was constantly riled up by was 'Where are the kids?' In our process, nobody was attempting an adaptation; nobody even worried about the end product actually relating to the Ibsen. It was purely an exercise in perceiving the play that would light a fire in us and get us to talk about the things we really needed to talk about. So mine was very much the relationship between mothering and marriage, modern marriage."

The Arab American Association *Places of Pilgrimage* workshop offered Raffo the opportunity to engage

with other mothers. "In the workshop I was with women my age and older, and we really bonded in our knowledge about motherhood, and knowledge in the length we go to, to protect our kids. Which is such a messy thing, especially as immigrants. Many of those influences were written into the Noura character."

There are similarities and differences between these middle-aged Arab American women and the playwright: "To them, I feel much more like the younger woman. But it's because I walked into the room as this American... And I don't have the constraints that they have as forty-fifty-sixty-year-old women that have had to immigrate. But yes, in the relationship to mothering, it was, it really brought out a lot in the Noura character in the play."

The immigrant experience is reflected in *Noura* through the characters' different perspectives on their identity and their life in the United States. As Raffo sees it, "Each person has a different threshold. Some people immigrate and really identify with the place they're at, and they talk about it... And then there are people that are in a constant war with themselves about what they miss and why. That is something I was really working with in the play. Some characters like the husband were okay. He was happy to be here. The wife couldn't grasp it. That was true of the workshops I led. Each woman in the workshop would have a completely different relationship to where they identify."

Although Epic Theatre Ensemble presented a staged reading in April, 2016 *Noura* is still in development: "The play itself is still in incubation, still fully in-process. ... I'm one of those team playwrights, maybe because I'm an actor, I allow it to be out in the world before it's ready. And I thought the really interesting thing about this was where it was in the process, more than where it was as a product." Raffo would like to find the right developmental home for it. She explains, "I feel like the script and story can develop best with a team around it. So as opposed to me writing in solitude and then trying to do a reading and seeing if it needs work, if the story is working out, I think it needs designers and a director. It needs discussions about the set. How does it breathe and move? Noura's an architect. So much of the play can change with that access to in-depth conversations about what type of place they live in and how that is the inner-manifestation of who she is."

Many of the original project goals have been achieved. "We created a demand for theatre in their lives. And maybe it will ripple across the community, or maybe the demand will only be in the women we worked with intensely. But in these twenty-year-old women, it's there." Two of the students are even working on full-length plays and considering being professional playwrights. Although the grant work and funding have come to a close, Raffo hopes to find ways to continue to work with the communities, including her continued mentorship of the invested students. "I'm quite close to them. And those that will continue to write, I will continue to mentor, whether there's a class or not."

Yet for Raffo, there was more at stake in the project: "The other none grant-related goals were to see what they had to say in their own words and give them an opportunity to do it." The writers have been encouraged by a steadfast mentor and by larger communities as well. Prior to the April reading, there have been public readings of the students' monologues with professional actors for their peers at Queens College; nine months later, Noor Theater had a public reading of those same monologues. Two years in a row, the monologues developed in both the *Doll's House* and "Places of Pilgrimage" workshops were read by professional New York actors, rehearsed, and put up in an evening of scenes and monologues.

Beyond that, the project has built community and support networks among the participants. Raffo points

out that the women will continue to work as groups. "The group serves as a support system and a real just group of peers and a place to workshop and develop themselves, both as writers or artists, but also just as people. Some of them that aren't even thinking about becoming a writer or artist are finding the process of it so self-exploratory and revealing. They all will say that they feel very changed by having participated. Their self-awareness and their connection to their own voice and opinion have radically shifted."

Raffo notes that the model developed over the past few years has possible implications for larger projects for other Arab-American communities beyond New York. This past summer she worked with Syrian refugees in the same way, on their own pieces. "The other thing I've been thinking about is this as a model and way of working. One could go into a number of Middle-Eastern communities anywhere in the world. One could go to Norway, for instance, London, Detroit... I could go to different places, I could lead a workshop and allow women to explore *A Doll's House* and write their own versions. It would be so interesting if it could be mounted, unanimously, in a really site-specific experience. So that one sees the multiple sides of any given Nora's story."

For more information on Heather Raffo, Epic Theatre Ensemble, Arab American Association of New York or Arab-American Family Support Center please visit: <http://heatherraffo.com/>; <http://www.epictheatreensemble.org/>; <http://www.arabamericanny.org/>; <http://www.aafscny.org/>.

Heather Denyer is a PhD Candidate in Theatre at the Graduate Center, CUNY, working on her dissertation, "Re-Defining Gender and Sexuality in New Francophone Theatre in Sub-Saharan Africa." Her recent presentations and publications include "Seeing Music in New West African Theatre," Equinoxes Conference, Brown University (2016); "Togolese Puppetry of the Oppressed," Annual Austin Conference, University of Texas (2016); "Re-Defining African Puppetry Traditions," National Puppetry Festival, University of Connecticut (2015); "Review of *The Routledge Guide to Puppetry and Material Performance*," Theatre Journal, 2015; "The New Traditional Puppetry of Werewere Liking," Puppetry International, 2015; "Looking Queerly for Feminist Spaces in Koffi Kwahulé's *Les Recluses*," ATHE Conference, Scottsdale (2014); and "Subversive Performativity: Performances of Racine's *Hysterical Women*," French Department Conference, Graduate Center, CUNY (2014). Heather has an MFA in Dramaturgy from Columbia University and a BA in Dramatic Literature from Northwestern University. She served in the Peace Corps in Cameroon from 2003 to 2005.



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