

Alias Godot

Fresh perspective on Beckett classic

Noor Short Play Festival

Finding the light with Nora Armani and Al Nazemian

Richard Rose

Tarragon Theatre's Artistic Director speaks to CR

Untitled Mars (this title may change)

Innovation and invention in New York

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CONTENTS

APRIL 2008>>

15 Letter From the Editor

FEATURES>>

8 In the Spotlight

Following the light with Nora Armani and Al Nazemian at the Noor Short Play Festival

14 Unscripted Dialogue

Artistic Director explains how depth of work elevates Tarragon Theatre above the rest

FOURTH WALL REVIEWS>>

In Toronto...

16 Alias Godot

Brendan Gall's new play takes risks, providing a fresh perspective on Beckett classic

18 The Barber of Seville

The Canadian Opera Company's production of perpetually popular Rossini classic

22 Beyond Mozambique

Failing to find a fresh approach to tired and worn George F. Walker play

In New York...

24 Bait

Sped dating and loathing with David Sisco and Tom Gualtieri at Stage Left Studio

26 Untitled Mars (this title may change)

Innovation and invention propel play about Red Planet colonization

In London...

28 Testing the Echo

New play by David Edgar challenges national identity, but lacks proper focus

30 Footprints in the Sand

Double-bill contrast in both style and theatrical success at Oval House

32 A Picture of Alchemy

Failed psychological study flounders amidst confused idealistic vision

BEHIND THE SCENES>>

34 Centre Stage

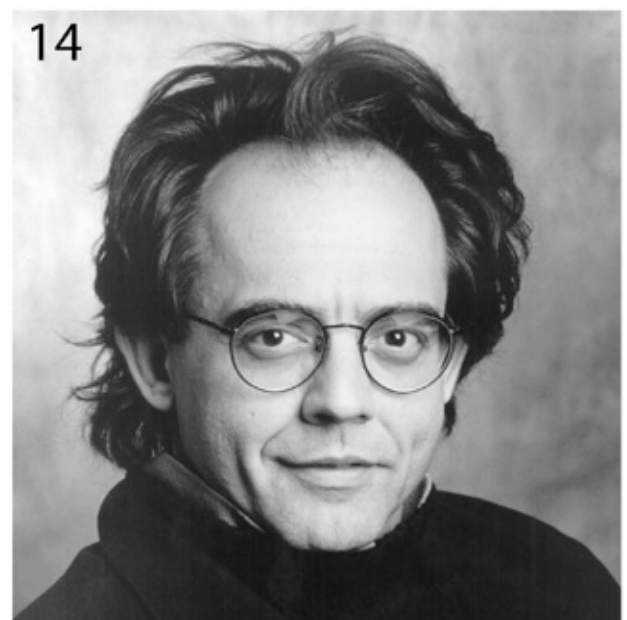
Curtain Rising pays tribute to a true Canadian artistic mainstay, and creator of new works: Toronto's Tarragon Theatre

36 Theatre Listings

May listings for North America and the UK

28







(Left to Right) Phyllis Kramer, Jay Rhoderick, Drummond Doroski, Al Nazemian in *The Sort of Happy Ending to the Sad Tale of Mr. Ali Ali: or the Lighter Side of Outsourcing Torture*, at the First Annual Noor Short PLay Festival in New York City.

FIRST ANNUAL...

NOOR SHORT

PLAY FESTIVAL

For three days in April, Wings Theatre in New York City was host to a festival of short plays, whose theme was to tackle Middle East-related topics through original comedic and dramatic performances.

Due to the overwhelming success of the festival, the lineup is scheduled to be remounted for Fall '08.

Here, Co-Producers of the festival, Al Nazemian and Nora Armani spend some time with Curtain Rising to discuss the meaning of the festival, the success of the shows and their plans for the Noor Festival '09...



Photo by James Beeler

Following the light at the Noor Short Play Festival

Co-Producers, Nora Armani and Al Nazemian, speak about first installment of festival

BY KATIE ROLNICK
CONTRIBUTOR

After our meal, Al Nazemian and Nora Armani said they had a gift for me. I hesitated, but they assured me it was only something small. From an opaque bag I lifted out a tuft of white tissue paper, which held a votive candle and holder. A spicy scent touched my nose and Armani and Nazemian smiled. Noor means light in Farsi, Arabic, and Urdu and the candle was meant to remind me of Nazemian and Armani's endeavor, the first annual Noor Play Festival.

But this simple gesture also revealed Nazemian and Armani's generosity. Throughout our dinner they urged me to try everything on the table – appetizing Persian dishes like Borani (a yogurt and spinach dip) and Ash (a combination of beans, spinach, and mint). And although their partnership began only a few months ago, they bounce conversation between each other like life-long friends, respectful of one another's perspective and trusting enough to let one speak for the other.

In early February Al Nazemian said he "planted the seed" for the Noor Play Festival. Two and a half months later, for three nights in April at New York's Wings Theatre, his seed flowered. Nazemian, who has worked and performed with the Arab American Comedy Festival, created the Noor Play Festival as an alternative outlet for theatre about Middle Easterners, as he said, "not just comedy and not just Arabic." Though Nazemian probably could have done it alone, it was the addition of co-producer and director Nora Armani that secured the festival's success. Nazemian met Armani when she responded to his ad on Craigslist soliciting directors and actors for the festival.

They met for lunch and, as Nazemian described the encounter, "I just felt I could trust her right away, and I was looking for a co-producer and she suggested it..." As he trailed off, Armani picked right up where he left off. "And I think we're very complimentary in a lot of ways, because I have a lot of production experience," she explained, while Nazemian sat nodding his head.

"My feeling is that looks matter less than essence and acting capacity."

It's easy to see how their creative energies blend. Nazemian laughs freely and speaks fondly, in French, Farsi, Russian, Portuguese, or English, of his Persian

heritage. Armani speaks five languages (no, six! Nazemian contests) and feels as comfortable in the director's chair as she does on stage. Nazemian and Armani are both a *mélange* of nationalities. Nazemian was born in Iran, but his family fled to Paris in the early months of the revolution. From there they moved to Toronto, Canada, where he has citizenship, and he now lives in New York. Armani's life reads like a major airline flight schedule: born to Armenian parents, she grew up in Egypt, moved to London to attend the London School of Economics, then jumped the pond, landing in Detroit, on to Los Angeles, then back to Europe where she hopped between Paris and London for over ten years. She has lived in New York for the past two and a half years. Their far-flung backgrounds suit the festival's goal: to enlighten audiences with honest and entertaining portrayals of diverse characters. Americans might find it hard to imagine how theatre with Middle Eastern characters could be anything but sober, but although some of the plays addressed contemporary political issues, that was not the festival's focus.

Writers who submitted scripts for consideration had to adhere to only one criterion: the play had to include at least one Middle Eastern character. Of the seven short plays that comprised this year's festival, none were written by Middle Easterners, which Nazemian and Armani found pleasantly surprising. To have playwrights of various backgrounds write Middle Eastern roles was exactly the sort of cross-cultural experience Nazemian and Armani hoped to incite.

Furthermore, not all of the Middle Eastern characters were played by Middle Eastern actors. Since the events of September 11th, 2001, there have been more Middle Eastern roles available, but most fulfill

Al Nazemian in *The Sort of Happy Ending to the Sad Tale of Mr. Ali Ali: or the Lighter Side of Outsourcing Torture*.



Photo by James Becker

(Left to Right) Al Nazemian (Omar) and Sharon Freedman (Clay bowl) in *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*.



Photo by Meredith W Hitefield

certain stereotypes – Nazemian played a terrorist in the first *Saturday Night Live* sketch spoofing Osama bin Laden. Nazemian and Armani do want to give Middle Eastern actors more opportunities to play interesting and fully realized characters, but because their primary concern was to create engaging theatre, they chose the best actor for each role, regardless of the actor's nationality. Armani said, "My feeling is that looks matter less than essence and acting capacity."

Much of Armani's directing sense comes from her time in Paris, where she trained at the avant-garde *Théâtre du Soleil*, and learned directing and acting techniques based on physical movement and a variety of theatre traditions, such as Indian dance theatre and Japanese Noh. Armani directed two of Noor's seven shows, and her experiences at *Théâtre du Soleil* particularly helped her find the humor in *The Sort of Happy Ending to*

the Sad Tale of Mr. Ali Ali: or the Lighter Side of Outsourcing Torture, written by Craig Abernethy. The play tells the story of a Canadian man of Pakistani descent, Mr. Ali Ali (played by Nazemian), who is mistakenly abducted by the American government as a terrorist suspect. He is sent to Egypt, where he is tortured, and after two years is finally released. Hardly the stuff of comedy, but the show is written, as Armani described, "in a circus like fashion," where the characters – including a ringmaster, George W. Bush, and Larry King – are all, "grotesque and bigger than life. They're extraordinary and strange." These over-the-top portrayals and Armani's understanding of different theatrical modes transformed tragedy into satire, showing just how ridiculous terrorist fear has become.

Armani also wrote and directed *Khawaga Story*, about Egyptian Jews in exile after Nasser's 1952 revolution. Based on the

book, "The Lost World of Egyptian Jews," by Liliane S. Dammond, the piece resonated with Armani's personal experiences as an Egyptian. Though she's not Jewish, Armani said the book, "grabbed me from the beginning." She then spoke the play's first line, "I left Egypt 50 years ago, but Egypt never left me," and her eyes drifted off to the side, as though she was seeing her homeland in her mind's eye. A few years ago Armani's cousin and uncle were stabbed to death by an Islamic fundamentalist. She says that she has fond memories of her childhood, because "where you spend your childhood marks you the most" but that her cousin and uncle's deaths have, understandably, complicated her feelings. *Khawaga Story* gave her the opportunity to express her love for Egypt while recognizing the tensions surrounding the country's history and her own.

Nazemian found a personal connection

to Scott McMorrow's play, *The Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayyam*. Omar Khayyam was a Persian mathematician, philosopher, and poet during the 11th and 12th centuries and his most famous poems are the rubaiyyat, or quatrains. In *The Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayyam*, the poet speaks with a clay bowl filled with wine, a metaphor for all of life's pleasures, embodied by a female actress. In reality, Khayyam questioned the ascetic life and eventually embraced a carpe diem attitude, and *The Rubaiyyat* shows his journey to get there. Nazemian played Khayyam, who happens to be his father's favorite poet, and although he thought McMorrow captured Khayyam's spirit, he said he, "wanted it to be authentic." So, he added a personal touch: he spoke the first two lines in Farsi. Nazemian has not returned to Iran since his family left when he was only four years old, but he identifies as Persian and his family is well connected within America's Persian community. Like

Armani, *The Rubaiyyat* helped him explore his own heritage while sharing it with a diverse audience.

And the audiences were diverse. Nazemian mentioned that many people complimented him and Armani on their ability to bring in such a wide range of spectators. They also sold out their first performance and wanted to extend their run, but the venue was not available. So, Armani and Nazemian are remounting the same lineup this fall. They are also planning the second festival, with new material, for next spring and they hope that in a few years the festival will be a city-wide event.

No one can say how America's relationship with the Middle East will look in a few years, but the Noor Play Festival will try to capture its complexities on stage. But, Nazemian and Armani both also recognize the power

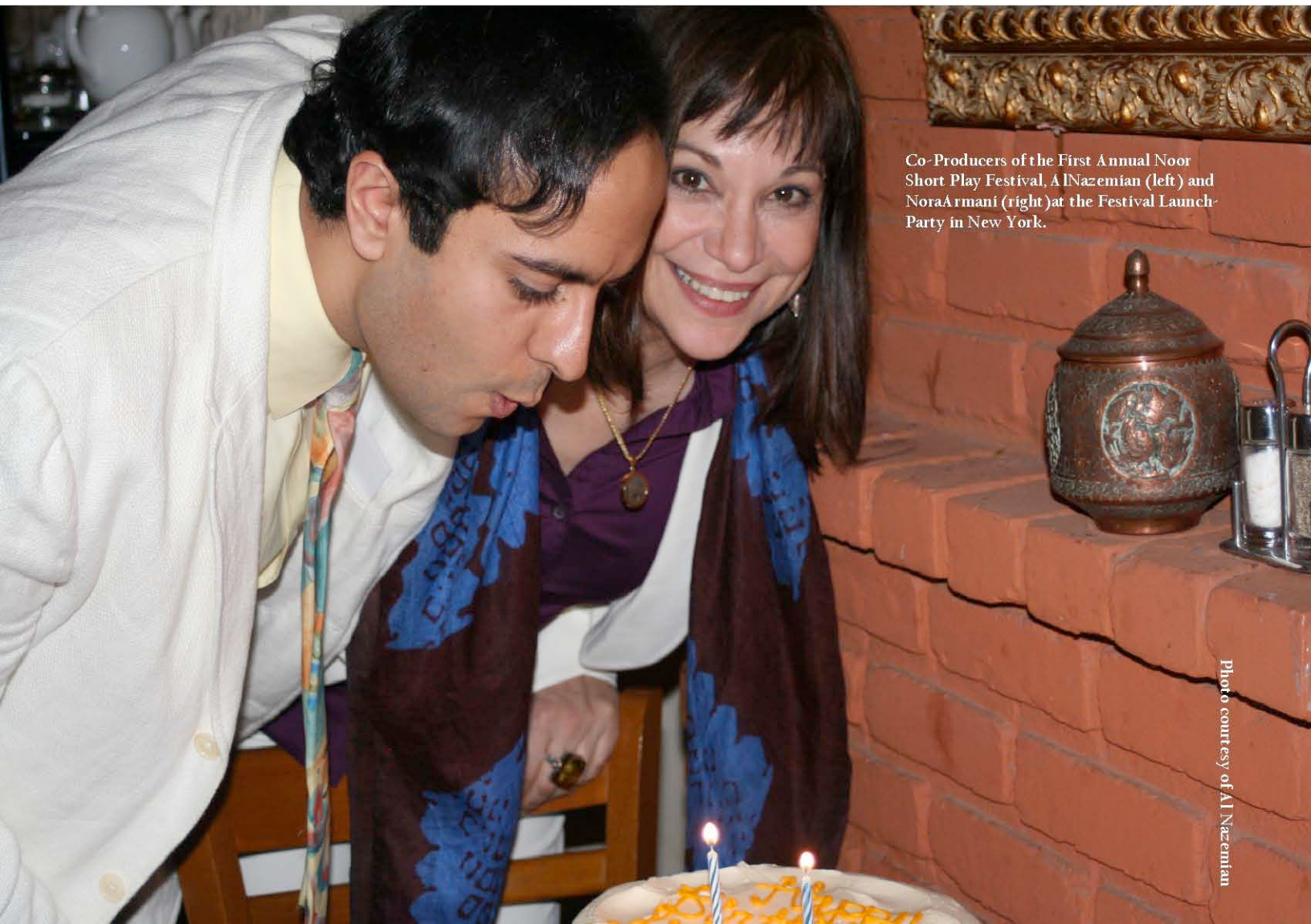
of theatre to illuminate the common human experience in a visceral way. In *The Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayyam* the clay bowl expresses the same sentiments:

Each of us enters. Each of us leaves. Some miss their cue and arrive late, while others exit prematurely, before the lights fade. Either way, it's the same for all. We are simultaneously the audience and the actor. In the end, what matters most is, did you play your role with a full heart? And did you learn to appreciate your performance?

Nazemian and Armani can confidently answer, "Without a doubt."

+DETAILS+

For more information about the Noor Short Play Festival, visit:
www.noorplayfestival.com



Co-Producers of the First Annual Noor Short Play Festival, Al Nazemian (left) and Nora Armani (right) at the Festival Launch-Party in New York.

www.noorplayfestival.com



NOOR