

## Arts &amp; Leisure

Section 2

## The New 'Arab' Playwrights

They're Female, They're Organized and They're... Not All Arab

By LIESL SCHILLINGER

PEOPLE who came to Layla Dowlatshahi's play "The Joys of Lipstick" last December at the Producers Club thought they were lining up to see a comedy about pretty Iranian women and makeup. What they saw was a drama about an Iranian lesbian who goes to visit relatives in Los Angeles so she can get a sex change and return to Tehran to live with her American girlfriend and a man.

"After one performance," Ms. Dowlatshahi remembered, "a man came up to me and said, 'I'm an Iranian professor, and this is fifth.' I said to him: 'I'm glad you hated the play. For me, as a playwright, I love it or hate it, at least you left with something unforgettable.' Americans loved it," she added. "And this play was for an American audience. If I wanted to write for an Iranian audience, I would write in Persian."

Ms. Dowlatshahi is a non-practicing Shiite Muslim who moved to California with her family from Iran in the early 1970s, when she was a toddler. Today, she is part of a new generation of female playwrights, born in the 1960s and 70s, most of them brought up in the United States by parents who left war-torn countries in the Middle East. Some of the women are ethnically Iranian, which means (essentially) that they are Indo-European, and speak Persian. Some are ethnically Arab, which means (essentially) that they are Semitic, and speak Arabic. Their religious roots vary: they are Christian,

Muslim or Zoroastrian (a faith that advocates good thoughts and deeds), and their national ancestry may be, to name a few, Iranian, Palestinian, Lebanese or Indian. But they are united by a commitment to take their heightened experiences to the New York stage, and by their perception that, although many of them are not Arab, that is how they often are seen in the United States at this tense moment in the country's history. Moreover, they embrace the confusion: "It's an honor to be called an Arab for so long," Ms. Dowlatshahi said. "I am not Arab. To be called Arab is trying to put a familiar, human face on Arab identity."

It is not surprising that their voices are only being heard lately: the women belong to a new demographic. They are breaking a path not only creatively, but socially, overcoming pressures from the immigrant community to find husbands, not agents.

Betsy Shabeh, perhaps the best-known of the dramatists (her play "Roar," starring Annabella Sciorra and Sarita Choudhury, opens on Wednesday at the Clurman Theater), said she feels supported by Palestinian-Americans in the Bay Area, where she grew up. But, she explained, "People in the home country don't have to hold onto their culture as strongly as those who left it. It's

kind of a time warp."

Kayhan Irani, a Zoroastrian, and author of "We've Come Undone," a collage of post-Sept. 11 monologues, said, "Every Iranian I meet always asks me am I married and how many children do I have."

The women report, however, that their parents have encouraged their ambitions. Ms. Irani, who lived in Bombay and Tehran as an infant but grew up in Queens in New York, is typical. "My parents haven't pushed the marriage and family thing," she said. "They support me 110 percent."

Most of these writers work independently, but in the summer of 2001, a handful of them in New York — playwrights, actors and directors — formed a collective called Nibras, Arabic for lantern. Najla Said, daughter of the late Edward Said, the scholar and fierce advocate of Palestinian statehood, is a founder, along with Kathryn Leila Buck, Maha Chehlaoui and four others.

Ms. Buck, a Lebanese-American whose one-woman show, "Isite," describes her life

## Americans may be more receptive to Arab women than to Arab men.

as a diplomat's child in the "sites" of Oman, Kuwait, Iraq and America, said: "Initially, we were like, 'Wow, there are seven Arab-American theater artists?' Who knew?"

They began work on a documentary theater piece about what people think when they hear the word Arab. They called it "Sajjil," or record. Tape recorders in hand, they interviewed a cross-section of Americans — both Arab and non-Arab — and acted out the responses onstage in a style made familiar by the performer Anna Deavere Smith. According to Ms. Said, "The point we were trying to make was that Arab culture is linked to Islamic culture, but not all Arabs are Muslim, and not all Muslims are Arab; and not all people from the Middle East are Arab; that may be a varied culture."

Of course, Israel is also part of the Middle East, but so far Nibras has not collaborated with Israeli artists. "We're still finding our voice in the community," said Ms. Chehlaoui, the group's artistic director.

One of Israel's most vocal dramatists who might be interested in working with them is an Israeli respondent — an Arab Israeli, not a Jewish Israeli. "If we'd killed ourselves as a Middle Eastern theater compa-

ny, it might be different," Ms. Said said. "But we're an Arab-American theater company, so we have attracted Arabs, not Turks, or Iranians, or Israelis."

Ironically, the founders of Nibras were not sure themselves what "Arab" meant. "To some people," Ms. Said said, "Arab-American is a group of people in Detroit. That's not a group of people that I necessarily relate to. To other people, Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn — that's Arab America. But I grew up in New York City, on the Upper West Side. Most of our members are more like me; we're not connected to the recent immigrants. I spent much of my childhood and college years knowing my heritage, but always being able to pass as just like everyone else. People would say, 'Oh, you're not one of them.'"

This sense of detachment ended a few weeks into the "Sajjil" project, when terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center. "After 9/11, our meetings became therapy sessions about how we all were feeling," Ms. Said said. "Sajjil" was presented at the 2002 New York International Fringe Festival, and has been restaged frequently. In the show, Jaqui, an Arab-American, says that, to her, the word Arab sounds "offensive and very harsh." Asked to define Arab, Kevin, a non-Arab, says: "Evil comes to mind. Dark, shady. Um, uh, sneaky, dishonest." "Sajjil" does not try to answer the question of why people feel this way; its innovation is to ask the question.

The group is now developing a project that confronts terrorism directly. "Actually, it's very frightening," Ms. Buck said. "We went to the library and read news accounts of suicide bombers, attempting to understand their psychology." With "Sajjil," Nibras was trying to improve the American public's impression of Arabs, Ms. Buck said, adding, "but there's another side."

"There are Arab terrorists out there," she continued, "and we don't know anything about them, or why they do what they do."

Men, members of the audience, of Nibras, including Omar Metwally, who portrays a Palestinian in the play "Sixteen Wounded," now in previews on Broadway. Yet, in the task of hunting Americans of Middle Eastern descent, plays by and about women may have an edge over stories by and about men. "I think the idea of an Arab man is scary to Americans," Ms. Dowlatshahi said. "Growing up in this country, I've always sensed there's been a fear of Muslim men, and of any kind of ethnic minority, especially male. They're seen as a threat. It's easier to acculturate to a female Arab or Muslim voice than to jump to a male."

The playwrights have different artistic agendas. Ms. Dowlatshahi, whose newest work, "Waiting Room," is about Muslim



Photographs by Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Kayhan Irani, above ("We've Come Undone"), lived in Bombay and Tehran but grew up in Queens.

women in a Serbian rape camp, is the most feminist in her politics. For Ms. Irani, whose portraits in "We've Come Undone" include an insensitive I.N.S. worker and a Sikh woman who gets a hate call, theater is a tool for education and raising awareness. Several Nibras members share that ethic, but to Ms. Buck, politics are more personal. She wrote "Isite" while a student at Wesleyan University, after visiting her parents in Saudi Arabia. "Saudi is more conservative than other places I'd lived in the Arab world," she said. "If you're a woman, you have to cover" — meaning wear a headscarf — "it's the law. It made me think, what part of me is Arab, and what part of me is American?"

Ms. Shamiel, however, resisted even this mild variety of identity politics. When she was a student at the Yale School of Drama, from 1997 to 2000, she chose not to perform in plays on Arab-American themes. "I disliked being pigeonholed," she said. "And I wanted to get a few productions under my

belt before I became 'the Palestinian-American playwright.'" Nevertheless, during this period, she wrote two dramas using Arab-American characters: "Chocolate in Heat," a series of coming-of-age stories, and "Roar," about a love quadrangle. Her logic, she said, was: "I'm not going to change anybody's mind about the Middle East. I'm going to show a human story." "Chocolate" made its debut at the Fringe Festival in New York in 2001; "Roar," a New Group production directed by Marion McCintock, is scheduled to run through May 8 on Theater Row.

"They're not about politics," she said, "but they're inherently political. Because if you've never heard a perspective, it makes it political."

Ms. Shamiel is evolving, along with the genre that she and her colleagues are creating. Lately, she has been working on a suspenseful, non-linear drama about an Arab-American woman daydreaming about her ambitions, her passion for a half-Arab-American man and her fear of terrorism. The play, "Architecture," had a reading at the Magic Theater in San Francisco last week. "Being Palestinian is a large part of who I am," Ms. Shamiel said. "I knew it was something I would eventually come to know it would come to a clear choice for me; either stop writing, or start writing about what really matters to me." □

## HYPERNATED DRAMA 7

Arab-American female playwrights stake out their own territory.



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