



The New York Theatre WireSM

Theatre Dance Performance Art Music
Alternative and International Theatre

BEATE HEIN BENNETT

“A Night Without a Blanket”

April 7 to 24, 2016

Theater for the New City (Cabaret Theater), 155 First Avenue (at E. 10th Str.)

Presented by Theater for the New City

Thurs-Sat @8 PM, Sundays at 3 PM

\$15 general admission, \$10 Students and seniors

Box office: (212) 254-1109, www.theaterforthenewcity.net

Reviewed by Beate Hein Bennett April 11, 2016

Margo Lee Sherman, a veteran actress and formative member of Peter Schumann’s Bread and Puppet Theatre, performs her own adaptation of two stories by Palestinian poet, Ghassan Kanafani. Her work as solo performer has included political works, such as “What do I Know About the War?” which she devised and toured internationally, as well as Samuel Beckett’s “Footfalls” and “Not I” which she was the first actor permitted to perform in 1989 in the former Czechoslovakia after a twenty year ban on Beckett’s work.

In “A Night Without a Blanket” Ms. Sherman demonstrates her mercurial ability to slip into a variety of voices and bodies that people Kanafani’s two stories, “The Slope” and “A Present for the Holidays,” from his book “Palestine’s Children.” Both stories tell of the plight of growing up in the dire and humiliating circumstances under occupation and in refugee camps.

“The Slope” is the story of a cobbler who is forced to do his work in a cardboard box on the slope of a hill dominated by the “palace” of the rich man, as the little son of the cobbler tells it to the teacher and then to the principal of the school he attends. The child sees his father as so successful that everyone, including the rich man, has his shoes repaired by him, and that he works so hard that the work kills him—he tells a fantastic version of his father’s death. The story works on two levels, literally as the story of a very poor man whose very existence is progressively confined until obliterated, and as the story of a people who lost their existential basis by being forcefully corralled into an ever smaller living space. Margo embodies the child with a bubbly innocence as he tells with great pride the story of his father to those in authority over him. She also embodies the teacher and the principal to whom the child tells the story ever more embroidered; the teacher’s initial incredulity turns to pain when he witnesses the principal’s cruel rejection of the child’s imaginary version of the real fact of his father’s death.

The second story “A Present for the Holidays” presents the absurd situation of a donor from a rich country-- Margo’s accent makes him clearly into an obtuse albeit generous American—who thinks it is just great to send via a telephone order a shipping container full of toys for the Christmas holidays to the children in a refugee camp. It is clear that the donor has no idea what the living conditions are like. Margo again presents a child in counterpoint to the rich foreign adult as well as the teacher in the camp whose repeated refrain “but this is beside the point” cancels any potential positive view of such acts. The child, possibly a teenager responsible for finding food for his family, tells how everybody dove for the container to grab what they could. He meanwhile finds somehow one can of lentil soup that he brings home like a treasure from which his mother will carefully spoon out portions to make it last for several meals. Margo’s quick switches from serious child to loudmouth donor to disgusted teacher full of impotent resignation bring the tragedy of this situation into sharp contour.

Ghasan Kanafani (1936-1972), a writer who, as a sixteen year old, had been a teacher in a refugee camp, was ambushed and killed together with his niece in the explosion of his booby-trapped car. Although his work has

been translated and published in more than twenty countries, I must confess that I knew nothing of his work. We know mostly wholesale and cursory news reports of the tragedies of refugees and people under occupation; of their fears and their humiliations, especially experienced by the children growing up for years under those circumstances, we hear very little until they become the fodder for terroristic gangs and upset the "civilized" world. And yet, ultimately it is only when the human story is told one by one that it affects us.

Ms. Sherman has found a very important voice to impart this tragic story to us. With the coherent direction of Juanita Lara and the delicate lighting design of Miguel Angel Valderrama, the performance presents an insight into and a feeling for a world. Each individual story may be as small as "the fall of a sparrow" but as we watch it, we feel that we are encompassed in that fall.



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