



SILK MOTH Opera

SPECIAL PREVIEW

AT THE NOUR FESTIVAL OF ARTS

20th Century Theatre, 291 Westbourne Grove, London W11 2QA

7:30pm on Sunday 1st November 2015

There will be a Q&A session after the performance which you are invited to attend.

CAST AND SILK MOTH TEAM

Soprano: Enas Massalha

Ensemble Zar:

Ney: Louai Alhenawi,

Violin: Alda Dizdari,

Accordion: Zivorad Nolic,

Cello: Laura Moody

Musical Director: Toby Purser

Music: Bushra El-Turk, **Libretto:** Eleanor Knight

Directed and developed by Michael Moxham,

Co-director: Maria Koripas

Designer: Giulia Scrimieri

Video: Michele Cadei

Stage manager. Kristina Krecujl

Daughter Voice-over: Molly Moxham

Producer: Peter Brightman

Community Liaison: Rachida Sobhi

In partnership with the Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation (IKWRO).

Note from the librettist

A woman is expecting guests. She and her family have been through some difficult times recently and she hopes that, after whatever happens today, things will be different. Next to her, on the table, is her daughter's laptop, full of school projects, photographs, and memories.

Today is a family occasion, but the woman must face this part of it alone.

Somewhere in the region of 5,000 women every year are murdered by their own family members in so-called honour killings around the world, an estimated twelve of them in the UK. But these figures are guesswork. Honour violence, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and honour killing are part of an unspoken code wherein the social standing and financial interests of the immediate and extended family are inimical to women's autonomy, and where the value of men is invested in the chastity of their womenfolk. To speak out – whether you are a victim or a perpetrator, a child or a parent - is to risk losing everything: home, family, community, even life itself.

Having heard a little of Bushra's music, the prospective of collaborating with her on an opera was an exciting one for me, but tackling honour killing and FGM with a single soprano? That was going to be tough.

Researching recent cases of honour killings, the stories started to look all too familiar: daughters only ever appeared in the press as victims, smiling uncertainly from old, faded school photos. Fathers, brothers, uncles, with hands over their faces or blankets over their heads, would be shoved into waiting police cars as bystanders shouted abuse.

But what of the mothers?

Many of us will recognise the role of the mother these days as the message centre, so although it felt important to give the victims a voice, putting a mother on stage got me straight to the heart of the family drama. The father and daughter are both there too, albeit remotely, but focusing on the mother gave me a web of emotional complexity to play with and a chance to explore her complicity.

The tweets – messages from the daughter - are an anglicised attempt at Pashto landays, two-line poems that are part of an oral tradition of resistance amongst Afghan women and which have latterly found a natural home on Twitter. Landays are short and sharp, funny and subversive. They are poisoned darts thrown hard at male authority.

- Eleanor Knight, librettist

LIBRETTO

The house stood in a line
Of other houses just the same
Not the dust and colour of a village
Or the rush of war
But safe, anonymous, with ugly windows
And you, weeping at the door - 'How did our lives become so small?'
I cried to see you weep like a woman
I held your hand
You went on weeping.

Yes my love? I'm looking at you in a photograph and you look so cross. You look frightened. It was all so new for you. For all of us. I know. I will. I am watching the time. 'Til then.

How did we live?
I pressed my fingers to my lips and went to work
Late at night so nobody saw
I smelled of sweat and steam and bleach and soiled linen.

Asleep in the afternoons I dreamed of cool silk
Like a sea

LANDAY/TWEET

You go in and out, my poor father
And you return a little poorer every time.

Documentary: *The silkworm Bombyx Mori. The adult female can lay up to 500 pinhead sized eggs in six days. The larvae hatch and spend forty days gorging themselves on mulberry leaves."*

She's a busy woman....

Forty days!
More than a dozen weddings all in one
More than a dozen daughters married to other men's sons

There was the business
Thanks to your cousin
Nothing was too much trouble
'How did you get work?' they asked.
'Immigrants!'

Documentary: *Approximately thirty thousand worms can hatch from a single ounce of eggs. That's twenty-five grammes in metric. Between them they will eat a ton of mulberry leaves and spin twelve pounds of raw silk.*

My daughter, the model student.
In their own time they are beautiful
In their own time they may be wise
In their own time they want to do to what is right
And we must help them.

I'm talking about weddings. Yes I know. Everybody's here. OK. As you want.

Documentary: *After all that eating, the larvae are fat and sleepy. It is time for them to make a cocoon. Each worm makes about a thousand feet of silk thread and wraps it tightly around its little body.*

LANDAY/TWEET

A woman is like a piece of silk
Precious, rare, and can be laundered at thirty degrees

Precious, you said
You are beautiful
Perfect
a prize

A thousand feet of silken thread
Woven in a hanging bed
Safe and comfortable until
Deft fingers harvest, boil and strip at will.

In their own time, we must help them.
Beautiful, suitable. You are a prize. Hold still.

LANDAY/TWEET

This flesh, pink, cut, cast down on the floor
Is your promise to them that I will never want more.

I told you, they're all here. What is happening? Have you heard anything? We can wait I suppose.

Documentary: *The silkworm stays in its cocoon for sixteen days. When it is ready, it excretes proteolytic enzymes to make a hole in the cocoon so it can get out. Unfortunately the enzyme damages the silk, so most silkworms are killed before this stage, either by boiling the chrysalis or exposing it to a very high temperature.*

We dwell within your name as under the shade of a glorious canopy
Bold and strong
Safe
And shame is a little grub, eating away, eating away.

I learned to want nothing
An absence where there might be need
Anger for love, jealousy
That's how it always was for me

You showed me silence for desire
Fear spins a cocoon
And we are safe on the inside.
What is best
Matters more than
What you want

LANDAY/TWEET

Thank you, mum and dad, for arranging the marriage bed, but
I want a husband like I want a hole in the head.

And They -
They see everything.
There is not one blind eye amongst Them
They eat up your mistakes with Their looking
As a starving man gobbles down his bread

Meetings

The mshabbak of your secret greetings
They gorged themselves on your honey

We are all here. Are you at the house? Do you have everything you need?
Have courage, my husband, it is in your hands.

The house stands in a line
Of other houses just the same
And you, weeping at the door.

LANDAY/TWEET

Your rubber gloves are yellow and cheap
They fit your murdering hands perfectly, my father.

Documentary: *The imago, or mature adult, emerges from the chrysalis.
Because it has been kept in captivity for so many generations, it is no longer
able to fly. Neither can it see.*

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