

Breathing Iraq
By Jessica Litwak

“It is a good thing to place different civilizations in contact with each other; that whatever its own particular genius may be, a civilization that withdraws into itself atrophies; that for civilizations, exchange is oxygen.”

-Aimé Césaire, African poet and political theorist

Sometimes it is hard to breathe on the streets of Basra. Dust is everywhere, dust that blows in from the desert, dust from the perpetual construction of bridges and buildings that are never finished, dust from the intense traffic, dust from the fires burning oil, dust from the rubble, a constant reminder of war.

The women’s faces are protected from dust with the coverings of burkas and hijab, but when dust really gets stirred up, the men have to wear scarves over their mouths and noses to make breathing possible. Basra is a city that needs fresh air and oxygen. But when a deep breath can be taken, when one is out on the river for instance, the ancient beauty of the city and the spirit of its people fill the heart and clear the lungs.

We are on a river cruise in the Tigris River where the air is clear and the dust is absent. We are on the deck after a large lunch of meat, fish, hummus and soft flat bread. My bodyguard follows me up to the very top of the boat where the young theatre companies have gathered to take in the view: Saddam’s abandoned yacht and palace, the submerged ruined boats along the river, the landscape of palm trees and far off oil fields burning, and the surrounding desert. The Egyptian company of actors begins dancing and chanting and singing regional folk songs. They are rowdy and proud, waving the Egyptian flag up and down to the musical rhythms specific to their country. They bring the women into the center—the Sudanese actress, the visiting scholars, and me. Their inclusion of the women in the dance is a kind of rebellion in a culture of gender separation and exclusion. We begin to dance with freedom and joy that rocks the upper deck of the boat. The bodyguard tries to stand close, but I leave his side to celebrate the fresh air streaming in from the music of voices and stomping feet. Suddenly, on the other end of the boat a group of Iraqi actors began their own chants and dances. A call and response between the two countries emerges. Slightly competitive, vaguely fierce, a kind of collective musical war of peace

begins to shake the river itself. A police boat follows us. The music alerts the militia to some action of wild release. But the sound and movement is so intoxicating, so alive and so full of love that all they can do is to listen. There is no action but to clap their hands together. There is nothing to do but dance. What happens next is a theatrical and musical battle of artists that goes back and forth exchanging passionate national ancient expression. An elderly professor from Sudan holds my arm and whispers to me "This is the only way we will unite the Arab world - with art."

The invitation comes into Theatre Without Borders (TWB) one Wednesday afternoon. Amir Al-Azraki has written to us asking if there is anyone who could immediately come to Iraq in the next two weeks to be one of the judges at a festival and forum of academic theatre. Roberta Levitow, a co-founder of TWB, forwards me the email with one single sentence: "Want to go to Basra?" I am to be the one U.S. judge on a panel of six. Each judge will be an academic and/or professional theatre artist. Passports, visas, plane tickets have to be quickly arranged. It seems like an impossible feat, but I decide to make the attempt. It involves canceling two workshops and a presentation at The National Drama Therapy Conference and losing certain fees and travel expenses that I have already paid. It involves getting a substitute for a local class I was teaching and rescheduling a staged reading. Why is it so important to attend this festival in Iraq? I am not sure but I am compelled to continue working to make it happen.

It has something to do with curiosity, something to do with professional fulfillment and something to do with guilt and a strong need for symbolic retribution. I had always been aware of the national shame I have felt for what the US government did to Iraq over the course of two wars. I remember protesting desperately after 9/11 to stop George W. Bush from invading Iraq. I remember the night marches and the futile attempts to bring sense to the power machine in Washington, to stop what seemed such a senseless action. But I didn't ever imagine that art would give me the opportunity to take a small step towards mending. Suddenly so many years after my country invaded Iraq, here was my chance.

The festival was the brainchild of Dr. Abdul Kareem Abood Ouda who is the Dean of the College of Fine Arts at Basra University. He wanted to bring different countries from University Theatres in the Arab world to Basra. His dream was to establish a festival in this once cultural mecca in Southern Iraq. Morocco had been the center of Arab University Theatre, and Kareem felt it was time to shine light on his own city, which has been over shadowed by the art scene in

Bagdad and destroyed by occupation and war. Kareem felt that a strong energy would emerge from a theatrical collaboration between educational institutions, and he believed it would help the world to see a safer and more culturally dynamic Basra. His dream was that Basra University could help enhance the cultural exchange within the Arab world. He told me, “In this current and very difficult situation, people think that Basra is not supporting culture, and we want to change this perception. We want to bring educators and students together to do theatre.” His mission was to bring theatrical and academic representatives from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan and Sudan to Basra for a week of 13 plays judged by an international panel of judges. He said this event could never have happened during the occupation. “The occupation killed everything in Iraq.” Kareem stated, “Before the occupation, the University supported the Arts. Now we have to work to bring that support back.”

Dr. Amir Al Azraki supported Kareem’s efforts. Al- Azraki felt that the festival would have an effect on the artists, what he called “the elite professionals “ that attended the festival from many universities and Arab countries. He said, “The shows are not for everyone. They are for those interested in theatre. The festival will have a relative impact on our society. It will help us maintain and build our cultural identity.”

I travel to Iraq in early November against the advice of close friends, family and the US State department website which currently claims: “The Department of State warns U.S. citizens against all but essential travel to Iraq given the security situation. Travel within Iraq remains dangerous.”

Basra was the scene of much destruction and civilian casualties through much violence—the Iran-Iraq war, The Persian Gulf War (“Operation Desert Storm,”) the mass executions conducted by Saddam Hussein, and the most recent occupation by American and British troops that controlled the province of Basra until 2007. Advised to hide my American citizenship by not speaking English in public, I am also warned to hide my female curves with large loose fitting clothing and head scarves, and most of all to hide the fact that I am Jewish. This fact I should somehow hide from everyone. Only 6 miles from the Iranian border, Basra is not a great place to be an American, and a worse place to be a Jew. The risk of kidnapping is high, and I, told in no uncertain terms that my kidnapping would be very inconvenient not only for my hosts, but also for the US government. I am prepared to keep a low profile. Not something a middle class

American theatre artist is used to doing. But I buy some loose fitting shirts and some headscarves and promise to be quiet.

One can get a Visa for entrance into Basra fairly easily with an invitation from the Iraqi government (it is much more difficult to get a Visa to visit Baghdad) but I almost am not allowed onto the plane in Dubai. Paperwork is waiting for me in Basra, and many urgent phone calls have to take place at the last minute in order for me to board the plane. At the Basra airport, I am greeted by Kareem, Amir, my translator Ali and several bodyguards in shiny suits who look more like more mafioso than Arab soldiers. A Sudanese theatre group from a University in Khartoum arrives on the same flight as mine. Security is high. We travel in armored vehicles to our hotel.

Basra built in 636 CE, is in the historic location of Ancient Sumer and the home of Sinbad The Sailor and the possible location of The Garden Of Eden, which, like Basra, turned out to be a pretty difficult place for women. The University of Basra, founded in 1964, is now a bustling institution where young women come together to study a myriad of subjects along with men. Although the facilities are minimal, the spirit of excitement and enthusiasm are evident on campus.

The festival venues range from a small university theatre across from the dean's office, to a large theatre in downtown Basra, to an arts facility in the ancient section of town. Each event is packed full of eager students. As the only American, I am painfully aware of my dubious celebrity. From the opening ceremony to the final award event, I am surrounded by television cameras and interviewers asking me about my feelings about Iraq, the festival, and "Sandy", the recent storm that has hit my hometown. In a city where the lights go out suddenly and regularly, I am amazed that everyone is so concerned about a bunch of New Yorkers who have lost power. I answer blandly and politely, with sincere optimism and careful self-censorship to be sure my Jewish American theatrical mouth stays restrained.

The plays themselves are wide ranging in both subject and quality. We are not only watching the plays (all of which are in Arabic) but also judging them (on various criteria from "Best Actor" to "Best Script" to "Best Scenography") we take copious notes and discuss each of the plays and the performers in serious detail daily. I excuse myself from voting on the scripts themselves due to the language barrier but I pay very close attention to all the elements other than language that I can understand (acting and directing quality, use of lights and sound" etc.)

The plays span a huge spectrum—from a Japanese story about a soldier marooned on an island and contemplating suicide, to an artist’s internal demon-censor, to a homoerotic play that uses water to drench actors and audience alike. Some of the best offerings are a one woman play with multimedia elements that focuses on the struggles of a homeless Iraqi woman, and an adaptation of an Ionesco play by the Egyptian company, and a version of *The House Of Bernarda Alba*, Lorca’s play about a domineering matriarch who imposes ultimate control over her five daughters. It was quite extraordinary to see this brutal play, which explores themes of repression, passion, and conformity done by theatre students from Iraq who experience some of these same themes in their daily life. One of my favorite productions was an ensemble piece by five young men from Baghdad, in which actors operated sound and lighting to enact a spontaneous collaboration between people fighting oppression. The actors find freedom against all odds and the audience is stirred to a cheering ovation. Although the plays are diverse in subject and scope, they all contain an element of over-the-top spectacle (psychological realism is not the driving theatrical force in Basra) and all of them touch on the subject of freedom from oppression in one way or another. Making theatre in the face of such difficult and fearful circumstances with such minimal support seems heroic to me. The plays are good, or bad or mediocre not unlike the usual fare in New York. But the road to make these plays has been much rockier, filled with dust, rubble and checkpoints.

“This is a bad checkpoint,” Amir says on the way from one venue to another one night, “cover your head, look down, don’t speak”. I don’t know what is “bad” about this particular checkpoint. None of them seem “good” to me. Every few blocks the car stops, the driver turns on the inside light. A man in Military garb carrying a machine gun (there are so many guns in Iraq that they begin to look like toys) shines a light into our faces, asks for identification, the driver mumbles a greeting in return, waves a nervous salutation. Streets are filled with tanks. This is how life is here. Everything is uncertain and unsafe. No one seems to know who is in charge, who is manning the checkpoints, who the gunmen are reporting to, what the danger is exactly—they know it’s there, and that it is better to be quiet and careful, but the rules of censorship are general and no one can explain them to me. I sit in the middle on the back seat, my head covered, not making eye contact, my armed bodyguard next to me. This particular checkpoint keeps us awhile longer than usual. He asks a question about me—gesturing towards me in an increasingly angry voice. He asks for my passport. I am suddenly afraid. Anything can happen here in the

dark. I wonder if I will ever make it back to America. But finally he nods us off and we speed off towards the next checkpoint. I hope silently that it's not a "bad" one.

I teach a five-hour workshop at Basra University on my last day there. The class is in voice, acting and playwriting. I teach aspects of psychodrama, forum theatre, character development, viewpoints and composition. The students are receptive and eager. We create original pieces and perform them. We then discuss them and work on both the form and content of each one. The students are passionate about the work. They refuse to take a break and keep on working and playing. My translator Ali is working hard. He dives into the action, acting and vocalizing along with the students. Observers come in and out. We don't pay much attention to them. We are invested in the theatrical exploration. There are seventeen men and three women in the class. It would be the opposite in the west. By the end of the day, due to scheduling issues, there is only one woman left. She is brave. She throws herself into the scene work. The last assignment of the workshop is to take a series of stage directions and compose a short piece with two characters and a clear relationship with some point of conflict that gets resolved in the course of the play. The young woman and her partner come up with a scene about a husband beating his wife. The scene is realistic and brutal. They follow the stage directions exactly. She is beaten, lying on the floor with him standing over her, kicking her face. She weeps. He walks out in disgust. I ask the students to talk about this scene. The actress reveals that this is a scene she has seen and heard about many times, in her own life and in the lives of other women she knows.

I ask the class to explore the woman's options. Does she have any? "Yes" says one young man "She can hit him in the face" "No" says another student, "if she does that he will kill her". "She can kill him first," offers another fellow. "She can run away," says another. Then a man in the back raises his hand. "She could stand up quietly and kiss him on the forehead. He will feel so ashamed that he will crumple up and ask her forgiveness." "Which version do you want to try?" I ask the actors. They chose the last one. They carefully re-do the scene, keeping the stage directions, the character quirks, the vocal precision. But this time instead of giving up, the character calmly stands and enacts the gentle rebellion. The male actor breaks down crying. "Please forgive me," he begs. "Forgive us all."

The next day as I get ready for the drivers and bodyguards to transport me to the airport, the family of one of the PhD students from Basra University comes to say goodbye to me at the

hotel. His wife has never met a woman from another culture. She and I sit and hold hands as her husband translates our conversation.

On the way to the airport, Dr. Kareem and Amir ask if I will come back to Basra the following spring. They ask if I will collaborate on a play with Amir and develop it as a cultural exchange between our cultures. I say yes. We begin to brainstorm. For The Land They Love, is a bridge between two cultures seen through the perspective two families (Iraqi and American). It merges the fantastic and the realistic in a series of scenes that move through time, across geography and traverse the worlds of the living and the dead. The characters (two soldiers, two mothers, and a grave digger) work through urgent circumstances using comedy, heightened poetry and dramatic naturalism. We are off and running.

There are 7 checkpoints on the way to the airport. In 4 of them a female guard searches me. I finally make it to the airport. The Sudanese theatre company that was there at my arrival is taking the same flight back to Dubai. The elderly professor sits next to me on the plane. “We knew you were Jewish” he tells me. “It’s your nose that gives you away.”

I fly from Iraq to San Francisco to participate in The ReOrient Forum, a special weekend of artistic dialogue, presentations, and performances in conjunction with the ReOrient Festival of Middle Eastern Theatre. I speak on a panel about providing assistance and support to artists at risk. Theatre Without Borders and freeDimensional, two grassroots networks with which I work, have initiated a new partnership to help global artists under threat. In the course of this weekend, I am able to speak about my trip to Iraq and connect with other artists and activists who want continue building bridges from east to west.

“What’s the next step?” I ask Amir and Kareem. According to Amir, the next step is two-fold. First of all, he says, “Theatre needs to be brought to the streets” so that it can be shared by all members of the community. “Intellectuals”, he claims, “tend to criticize and theorize. We need to take theatre to the average person.” “Secondly,” he says, “We need practical projects between the east and the west that share a vision. Theatre is a great venue for people to share ideas. It’s not like poetry or writing a novel or painting a picture. It can’t happen in an individualistic manner. It has to be collaborative.” He believes that people living even temporarily together in a collective environment will be able to know each other, to have meaningful, useful conversations and to share valuable ideas. Amir says, “practitioners are more important than intellectuals within nations in conflict. The media and politicians separate us. But if we communicate through theatre

we can come closer to understanding each other. Theatre can serve as a medium to tear down stereotypes.” Amir says that Iraq is more open-minded than the world sees. “We are not barbarians,” he says. He feels the most important progress is the kind of work he and I are doing together. “This kind of interchange” he says, “gives us a space to know each other better through art.”

The creative cultural exchange, has the capacity to breathe forgiveness, reconciliation and healing into both America and Iraq. This artistic oxygen gives life, and we are able to find moments of freedom, one breath at a time.

Jessica Litwak, RDT is a theatre artist (playwright and performer), registered drama therapist, teacher, and an activist/organizer. A steering committee member and co-leader of the Arts and Human Rights initiative for Theatre Without Borders, Litwak is also a case consultant for the Artists In distress Services Committee for freeDimensional. She was on the full time theatre faculty of San Francisco State University and Los Angeles City College Theatre Academy and teaches in the Graduate Drama Therapy Dept. at Lesley University. Performing, writing and teaching courses in Theatre for Personal and Social Change, she has current projects in Iraq, India, Palestine, Cameroon and Lebanon. She is a co-founder of The Dream Act Union, Artistic Director of the New Generation Theatre Ensemble, and The H.E.A.T. Collective. Litwak’s work has been published by Applause Books, Smith and Krause, and The New York Times. Her many plays which have been produced throughout the U.S. and Europe include: The Emma Goldman Trilogy: Love Anarchy and Other Affairs, The Snake and The Falcon, Nobody Is Sleeping, Wider Than The Sky Secret Agents and A Pirate’s Lullaby. Litwak has a BFA from New York University’s Experimental Theatre Wing and an MFA from Columbia University. She is a PhD candidate at Antioch University in Leadership and Change Through the Arts. For The Land They Love, the Al-Azraki-Litwak collaboration is currently being developed collaboratively across 7,000 miles, and will be developed in early March in Lebanon with a team of Iraqi and American theatre artists. The playwrights will then return to their home countries and continue work on the play for its debut workshop in the U.S. next June hosted by The Joiner Center at UMASS.