

Shahid Nadeem's *Acquittal* in New York



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By Marvin Carlson

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Acquittal, a 1987 play by Shahid Nadeem, Pakistan's leading playwright, was presented in New York June 10-25, 2017 at the Studio Theatre on Theatre Row by the Pan Asian Repertory. The playwright flew to New York from Lahore to attend the production. Although readings of his work have been presented at the CUNY Segal Center and the Lark Theatre, this is the first fully staged production of his work, or indeed of that of any Pakistani dramatist, in New York City.

The play received a powerful, sensitive and nuanced presentation under the directorship of Noelle Ghossaini, a free-lance director with a special concern for drama with a socio/political orientation and with four very strong actresses, each of whom assumes a dominant role in the course of the work. The play is set in a cell in a woman's prison in Pakistan in the early 1980s soon after the military coup led by

General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq and the passage of the discriminatory “Islamic” laws, which sharply curtailed the liberties of women and minority groups. In 1987, while Nadeem was in political exile in London, he was approached by Madeeha Gauhar, a Pakistani women’s rights activist and director of the recent-founded (1984) Ajoka theatre in Pakistan. Like many activists, she had been arrested for protesting the new Islamic ordinances, and she asked Nadeem to create a play about the effect of the new “Islamization” on women, to be performed at her Lahore theatre on International Women’s Day (in March of 1987).

Nadeem, who had himself spent a year in prison in Pakistan, created a play based upon an activist like Gauhar, who is arrested and temporarily placed in a cell with three other women, none of them are upper-class intellectuals like herself, who are there for various other crimes. One, forced into marriage as a girl with an elderly man, abused by him and his son, and unable to escape or gain a divorce, killed her tyrannical husband with an axe. Another is carrying a child born as a result of rape and refuses to allow it to be aborted, as the authorities demand. A third is serving as a kind of hostage for her son, who stole from their mutual employer and cannot be found.



Author Nadeem at curtain call. Photo: Fawzia Afzal-Khan

The play begins with the four women each in her own world, consciously or unconsciously separated from the others, but as the evening progresses, their barriers gradually dissolve until by the time they gain various forms of release, they have formed strong emotional ties and provide critical support for each other. The intellectual (Zahia Zaman, played by Aizzah Fatima), the character presumably most like members of the audience, leads us into the play, blending narrator and character as she describes her situation and remarks in astonishment and irritation about the cramped quarters, the lack of fresh air, the poor lights, and the absence of decent toilet facilities, all this ignored by her resigned and indifferent cellmates. The simple set, by You-Shin Chen, is minimalist but quite effective, being essentially a dark

grey real wall with a single small barred window near its top and a few rough tables and benches in the acting area.

The first cellmate to tentatively approach the newcomer is Jannat Bibi (played by Shetel Shah), mother of the runaway boy, who asks Zahia, as an intellectual who knows how to write, to compose a letter of appeal for her son. In her lengthy and rather rambling dictation, we learn of her life of deprivation as a servant. Later each of the other two women, the murderess Jamila (played by Gulshan Mia) and the pregnant Marium (played by Salma Shaw), will, under different circumstances, present what are essentially monologues introducing themselves and their reason for imprisonment. The alternation between these monologues and the scenes of growing support and understanding among the women make up the basic rhythm of the production.

The individual prisoners are powerfully and effectively contrasted in their voices, bodily movements, and tonality: the hardened and withdrawn murderess, who gradually is discovered to have what may be a deeper understanding and greater intelligence than any of her fellows; the deeply suffering mother, whose concern for her missing son outweighs any personal concerns; the intellectual, who comes to understand that her dedication to women's rights has not included any acquaintance with or understanding of woman like those in her cell; and the pregnant Marium, whose songs, dance-like movements, and occupation with the life within her give her an otherworldly, almost Ophelia-like distance from her surroundings.



Marium and Zahida Zaman. Photo: Fawzia Afzal-Khan

As the play draws to an end, each of the characters depart to their separate fates. The intellectual, thanks to her higher social position, is released with a grudging apology. The murderess is sent to the gallows. The mother is set free when her son is found and arrested, bringing her no real release. And the pregnant Marium is taken away and returned to the cell having had her illegitimate unborn child forcibly removed from her. Her sobbing, broken body on a bench in the center of the stage is the final image of the play. Despite the very different stories and fates of these four women, in not a single case do we feel justice has been served. The condemnation of the regime's attitude toward women could hardly be more powerfully expressed.



Panel discussants, June 16. Photo: Fawzia Afzal-Khan

Following the performance on June 16 the author joined in an illuminating panel discussion with Dr. Saadia Toor from CUNY, author of a recent book on culture and cold war politics in Pakistan, and Dr. Fawzia Afzal-Khan of Montclair State University, one of the original cast members of the play when it

was performed in Pakistan in the 1980s.

Marvin Carlson is the Sidney E. Cohn Professor of Theatre, Comparative Literature, and Middle Eastern Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and Editor-in-Chief of Arab Stages. His research and teaching interests include dramatic theory and Western European theatre history and dramatic literature, especially of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. He has been awarded the ATHE Career Achievement Award, the George Jean Nathan Prize, the Bernard Hewitt prize, the George Freedley Award, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He has been a Walker-Ames Professor at the University of Washington, a fellow of the Institute for Advanced Studies at Indiana University, a visiting professor at the Freie Universitat of Berlin, and a Fellow of the American Theatre. In 2005 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Athens. His best-known book, *Theories of the Theatre* (Cornell University Press, 1993), has been translated into seven languages. His 2001 book, *The Haunted Stage* won the Calloway Prize. His newest book is *Four Plays From Syria: Sa'dallah Wannous* (Martin E. Segal Center Publications, 2014).



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