

## Events from the Arab/Islamic World at the 2019 PRELUDE Festival, New York





Sanaz Ghajar in *Iranian Girlfriend*. Courtesy: Marcus Middleton.

**Sanaz Ghajar, *Iranian Girlfriend* (October 3)**

PRELUDE 2019, the sixteenth annual Prelude Festival presented by the Martin E. Segal Center at The Graduate Center, CUNY, and co-curated by Sanaz Ghajar and David Bruin with the theme *Riotous Excursions*, enjoyed its opening night Thursday, October 3rd. It opened with a work-in-progress performance by Ghajar, an Iranian-American director, writer, curator, and DJ, titled *Iranian Girlfriend*. Following a narrative-lecture format, Ghajar began with the story of her birth as told to her by her mother in the context of the 1986 Challenger explosion. From there, she framed the performance to follow as "a tale about my mother's debris," as myth that "can triumph over data." She then elaborated on the concept of "debris," noting that she was "born to pick up the pieces," to sort through her mother's debris as her own. Throughout the rest of the performance, Ghajar guided the audience through this debris following lecture slide-show performance conventions, standing behind a podium with microphone in hand and projecting images and media which at times visually stacked up on the screen, edges overlapping and still visible. As she spoke about the images, she moved the podium and repositioned herself as a speaker throughout the space, from center stage, to its corners, and amidst the audience. The images included photographs of her mother and herself mixed among photographs of historical figures and, most substantially, of female artistic icons, many of whom, she noted, were tragic figures. At one point the voice of Sylvia Plath reciting poetry sonically entered the space; later a clip from the film *The Women* played on the screen; all these artifacts she folded in and situated among her and her mother's debris

through a web-like narrative across the personal, historical, and political spectrum. Ghajar closed with another personal story in which she described the experience of opening and sorting through the physical pieces left behind in her mother's storage unit, abandoned after her mother had returned to Iran. During the Q&A that followed the performance, Ghajar explained that interfacing with these objects is a way for her "to preserve the good."

### **Melis Aker, Jacinta Clusellas, Tatiana Pandiani, *Azul Otra Vez (Blue, Revisited)* (October 4)**

At the Elebash Hall, PRELUDE 2019 further presented work-in-process on the following day, October 4th. On the second day's session, Melis Aker, who is a writer, actor, and musician from Turkey, staged a 30 minute concert version of *Azul Otra Vez (Blue, Revisited)*, a new bilingual musical inspired by Rubén Darío's poetry and stories. With a backdrop of bluish watercolor (which changed scene by scene), *Azul Otra Vez* drew their audience in their Latin American cultural locus with musical numbers with Spanish lyrics. As a narrator, Aker explained in English that this is a story not only of fatherhood, generational trauma, and forgiveness but also of immigrant artists and their healing through memory, nostalgia, and imagination. Her narrative revolved around an immigrant father-daughter relationship. The father, who is a first-generation immigrant, compromises his artistic pursuit for his daughter's future in the U.S. Instead, he keeps cranking a music box for their living. His daughter, who also grows up to be an artist, suffers from her father's depression and addiction. At her therapist's recommendation, she revisits her childhood memories and her father's reminiscences, eventually understanding herself and her father. The concert version ended in harmony, a daughter and her father singing and holding each others' hands. Melis Aker's new musical shares a lineage of her previous works: the *coup / mama cycle*, which explored the notion of motherhood within the coup culture of Turkey, and the *synthesis cycle*, which created an original narrative by bridging two different cultural backgrounds—using a work from Turkey and one from the Western canon.

### **Target Margin Theater / Moe Yousuf, *Present Shame and Further Woe* (October 5)**

On the last day of PRELUDE 2019, October 5th, Target Margin Theater, and the associate artistic director Moe Yousuf presented their work-in-process: *Present Shame and Further Woe* at the Segal Theatre. According to Target Margin Theater, Yousuf, a Pakistani-American theatremaker, has been curating their essential program, TMT Labs, supporting diverse emerging artists and their new works since 1995. They explain that "difference" is the generative principle that motivates their productions, including classics, opera, literature, and new work inspired by historical sources. For instance, in 2018, they presented *Sindbad Lab*, which dismantled and rebuilt the classic Sindbad tales from *The Thousand and One Nights*, Yousuf participating as the associate artistic director. Their new work, *Present Shame and Further Woe*, explores South Asian anglophilia nostalgia for the former British Empire, its traditions, and subcultures. The performance started with Mary Neufeld's Shakespearean monologue in a kilt, accompanied by Brian Lawlor's bagpipes-like, intense digital sound effect. In the middle of the stage sat Yousuf with the bagpipes. As Neufeld's monologue became more and more enthusiastic, Yousuf's bagpipes sound cut in and merged with Lawlor's composition and Neufeld's monologue, filling the whole stage with their sound. At the end of their session of works-in-process followed a Q&A session. To a question about their future plans, Target Margin Theater answered that this new work, *Present Shame and Further Woe*, will have its premiere in Spring 2020 at Target Margin's The Doxsee Theater in Sunset Park, Brooklyn.

**Jacquelyn Marie Shannon** is a PhD student in Theatre and Performance at the City University of New York Graduate Center, as well as a theatre, dance, and ritual artist and teacher in New York City. Her work focuses on performance of and with the unseen, ineffable, and supernatural, and investigates how people make meaning within the sometimes blurred line between stage magic and ritual magic, spectacle and spirit.

**Dohyun Gracia Shin** is a PhD student in Theatre and Performance at the City University of New York Graduate Center. In her research, she focuses on gender and sexuality within a matrix of power, and considers how nonnormative bodies in performance might challenge hegemonic and oppressive forces and structures.



Arab Stages

Volume 11 (Fall 2019)

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Arab Stages is a publication of the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center ©2019  
ISSN 2376-1148