

Critic Note

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One of the most significant questions that come up when one tries to develop a critique for Zuleikha's rendition of *Arabian Nights* by Roland Schimmelpfennig is to be able to locate the play in the programming structure of KHOJ. Institutions and individuals, positioning themselves on the margins, often realize that 'the edge' often is an un-definable space and margins, and working with inter-cross disciplinary practices often lead the individual/institutions to cross disciplines in their own practices too.

When one sees a staging of an experimental play at the premises of KHOJ, one begins to question whether the agenda to explore boundaries from within the confines of visual arts has been expanded to include and support various 'cutting edge practices' across boundaries within the larger realm of artistic practice. However, Zuleikha Chaudhari renders the play more in the manner of an installation using the cast and set to transcend the descriptive category of theatre. Therefore at the end of it one sees a theater artist, working in (essentially a) visual arts space successfully transcending disciplinary frontiers.

The play (Performed on the 21 – 23 April, 2006) was an adaptation of Roland Schimmelpfennig's *Arabian Nights*, a heavily loaded text greatly influenced by European readings of the oriental heat and sensuality, though Zuleikha's rendition of the play substantially subverts the Orientalist bias. The format of the script is centred on constructs of 'laid down and available oriental woman' who is there to be obtained by the 'active male', provided the 'HE' goes through his assigned journeys, and encounters with 'fantasy fate'.

The narrative revolves around five characters (two women, three men), a high-rise apartment building and the male gaze. Heat, water and brandy are the recurring motifs in this play about mystery, lust, love, agony, ecstasy and hallucinatory visions. However what really arrested me throughout my many viewings of *Arabian Nights*, is how the core narrative centres around an ancient story telling tradition about harems, jealousy, revenge, curse and redemption; yet attempts to contextualize it in a contemporary urban setting...not letting go of the 'oriental fantasy' that informs and inspires its root narrative.

What also intruded me is when the essentially 'male' script is used and appropriated by a 'female' director how she handles the male gaze and sexualisation of the female body. Zuleikha does a brilliant job in subverting the male gaze without changing the script...but by using entirely formal devices. The gaze is still a motif of sexual desire but is stripped off its sensuality. However, I am still unable to pinpoint the point at which our gaze is subverted...does Zuleikha ride on the element of 'torture' inherent in the script and formally exaggerate it in a manner that disallows it to settle in ? or is it through a different take all-together? The voyeurism is subverted within the narrative by the manner in which adultery is punished...without any empathy to whether it is intentional or not...perceived or real...in this play breaking sexual barriers lead to death.

Certain uses of formal devices stand out in the play.... the first thing that struck me was that there was very little acting in the traditional sense of it. The play is more choreographed than directed (in the manner theater defines direction). The play begins with a sanitized all white setting.... and gradually unfolds into the white being disturbed by the grime and sand, which the actors pick up in the course of

the performance. This parallels the loss of sanity and the increase in the 'muck' that unfolds in the lives of the characters.

Like all Zuleikha's plays... this work is hyper pitched and seeks to maintain a (nearly) one and a half hour crescendo. The result is there is very little room for modulations, resulting in the 'high' tending to 'plateau' and become an extended flat. This necessarily put a lot of onus of modulation on the acting...requiring them to be high energy throughout...but still be very careful about how they pitch. As it is as an actor it must have been very difficult to employ the traditional modes of maintaining cues as Zuleikha consciously broke the 'traditional' links between actions and words...having the audience sitting so close to them. One must admit they did a brilliant job.