

**The Power of Transformation in Denmo Ibrahim's *BABA*:
A One Woman Show Journey into Family, Faith and Freedom**

Hala Sayed

Abstract

This paper tackles Denmo Ibrahim's play *BABA* (2011) as an example of a one- woman show that exemplifies the power of transformation of the body on stage. Ibrahim, an Egyptian American dramatist, has chosen to come closer to her life and rely on something real to draw from; hence she wrote and performed her solo performance *BABA*. This play covers thirty years and two continents and tells the story of both love and forgiveness between a daughter and the memory of her estranged Egyptian immigrant father who failed to adjust to the New York City life. The play includes a series of monologues, in which each character takes the stage. The study of the performance will emphasize how relying on the power of her body, Ibrahim literally transforms herself into the immigrant Egyptian father and manages to present a play about men and women struggling between identity and tradition in America, a weaving of the personal and the communal. Skillfully, she slips in and out of each character, and as *she personifies her father's last decisive moments in the U.S. waiting for a passport, Ibrahim becomes more understanding and ultimately realizes why kidnapping his child was the only solution left*. Thus, she has decided to create a show for her father and about him. She wanted to be in his shoes, and understand him from the inside. The analysis will show how studying men raised in the Middle East of different sizes and ages, learning their accent, tone and language, and conducting interviews of women who immigrated to the USA and the difficulties they faced, Ibrahim skillfully succeeds to perform a comedy about a very sad time for a hard working man who has long resisted and bitterly failed at the American Dream.

قوة التحول في مسرحية "ابا" لدينمو ابراهيم:
عرض مسرحي لامرأة واحدة بحثا عن الأسرة و الإيمان و الحرية
هالة سيد احمد
ملخص

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية مسرحية ابا لدينمو ابراهيم و التي كتبت عام 2011. و تعد المسرحية نموذجا للعروض النسائية الفردية التي تقوم فيها الكاتبة بأداء جميع الأدوار. و تظهر بذلك قدرة فائقة على التنقل بين الأدوار اعتمادا على قوة الجسد و مرونته. و لقد أثرت الكاتبة الأمريكية المصرية الأصل الاقتراب من حياتها الخاصة و أن تنقل صورا واقعية منها و تقديمها في عرض منفرد. و يعتمد العمل الدرامي على تقديم سلسلة من المنولوجات لعرض صورة من صور محاولة التعايش و الاندماج. و يجري هذا من خلال تقديم شخصية الأب و الابنة على مدار ثلاثين عاما بين قارتين مختلفتين. فهي قصة الحب و التسامح بين ابنة و ذكرى أبيها المغترب الذي هاجر إلى أمريكا قبل ثلاثين عاما أخفق في التعايش و التكيف مع الحياه بمدينة نيويورك. و يؤكد تحليل الأداء على مهارة دينمو في الاعتماد على قوة جسدها و قدرتها المذهلة على التحول بين شخصية الأب و الابنة حتى تصل إلى مرحلة التفهم التام لشخصية الأب و تقدر دوافعه لاختطاف ابنته من أمريكا و العودة بها إلى مصر كحل وحيد لأزمته بعد فشله في التعايش و تحقيق الحلم الأمريكي. فهو عمل مسرحي قدمته الكاتبة عن أبيها و من اجله. و هو يؤكد على الصراع بين الهوية و المحافظة على التقاليد داخل المجتمع الأمريكي. و يركز البحث على تمكن الكاتبة التام من اللهجات و السلوكيات و التي اكتسبتها من خلال دراستها لشخصيات رجال نشأوا بالشرق الأوسط من مختلف الأحجام و الأعمار و كذلك من خلال لقاءات أجرتها مع نساء هاجرن للولايات المتحدة و مناقشة الصعوبات التي واجهتهن. و يركز البحث على كيفية أن الاعتماد على مرونة الجسد و القدرة على التحول من شخصية إلى أخرى قد مكنا الكاتبة دينمو ابراهيم من تقديم عملا كوميديا يخاطب قضايا جاده تتناول مقاومة الفشل المرير في تحقيق الحلم الأمريكي.

The Power of Transformation in Denmo Ibrahim's BABA

"The body is a site of power and a site where power can be questioned and explored" (Colette Conroy)

Since the 1980s, a genre of solo performance has developed in the United States and beyond where a huge number of inspiring stories have been presented through solo performances which manage to unlock their power and transform them into our lives. "In the last fifteen years, solo performance and Monologue Theater has become the fastest growing segment of the world-wide theater community" (Kickstarter 1).

One-person shows may be personal, autobiographical creations where, "The use of persona as a means of social critique, the undermining of gender stereotypes through role-play, blurring the outlines of the autobiographical, 'authentic' subject, are recurrent features"(Wallace, *Monologue Theatre...*,13). Solo autobiographical performance which predominantly takes the form of monologue and is mainly about personal experiences has become phenomenal recently.

This paper tackles the solo performance *BABA* (2014); written and performed by the Egyptian American dramatist Denmo Ibrahim as an example of a highly physical one- woman show that explores the Middle Eastern American identity. The persona created through Ibrahim's performance is clearly autobiographical, possessed of a defined personality. This study aims at emphasizing how the performer, relying upon the relentless power of her physical body, tackles themes of dislocation, assimilation, dual loyalties and citizenship.

Solo performance is a field rife with self indulgence where many artists draw their resources from themselves. It is a sort of a journey into the self. Ken Bullock argues that solo shows are always, "a dicey proposition ... Sometimes strung midway between Performance Art and, well, monologues of all sorts, including not very theatrical ones, one man, one woman shows often devolve into a kind of live résumé for an actor to be able to show what he can do, between other roles in 'real' plays"(Para.1).

Subsequently, solo performers are regarded as storytellers whose stories have a storyline or a plot that expect and demand the active involvement of the audience. As a result, monodrama which is

a form of a monologue, "addresses the spectator directly as an accomplice and a watcher-hearer" and, the monologue theatre, whether solo performance or drama, "plants the self at the heart of the spectacle" (Wallace, *Monologue Theatre...*, 16). Plays which use one actor to embody multiple characters, "usually aim for fluid action and role changes in order to emphasize the performativity of the body"(Gilbert and Tompkins 234).

Looking at the how helps examine how meaning is created within a performance context. Catherine McLean-Hopkins in her article "Performing Autologues: Citing/Siting the Self in Autobiographic Performance", examines the characteristics of female autobiography onstage. "Autologue" is a newly coined signifier for the "disclosure of an interior, private world to an exterior, public audience" in the form of monologue that, as this author emphasizes, distinguishes the genre as "a self-narrated performance of the self—a performance practice that both cites the self as remembered iterations... and sites the self with the theatrical frameworks of space, time and presence" (186, 194). Besides, if there is dialogue in performance, there would technically be talking to the self, or the inward self or it could be directly talking to the audience the way it happens in the work under investigation.

Consequently, monologue dramas and performances rarely maintain, "The conventions of a naturalistic stage space". On the contrary, Clare Wallace explains, "the empty stage or site-specific locations deliberately disrupt the illusion of the fourth wall" (*Monologue Theatre...*, 6). One of the distinctive traits of solo performance resides in its frequent lack of a fourth wall separating the performer from the audience.

This paper focuses on Ibrahim's exceptional ability to merge the presentational with the representational. While she acknowledges the audience, she identifies herself with the character; thus creating an interaction between the presentational and the representational. The study shows how the performer steps out of her role, breaks the fourth wall and interacts with the audience both directly through addressing them and indirectly through the use of language, the looks, and the gestures. Ibrahim communicates with her audience through both language and action. However, though aware of the audience's presence, Ibrahim does not concern herself with the external realities of the theatre, and becomes, instead, fully absorbed

The Power of Transformation in Denmo Ibrahim's BABA

in the dramatic action and remains in the character. Ultimately, this study underscores how solo performance could serve as a transformational process for both the performer and the audience.

Through a two-act monodrama, Ibrahim presents a personal family tragedy that spans a heroic journey of an Egyptian father and daughter facing the problems of getting from New York to Cairo after failing the American dream. The play incorporates a series of monologues, in which each character takes the stage. Denmo Ibrahim plays both characters: the father and the daughter: Mohammed, an Arab American in his late thirties and Layla, an Arab American also in her late thirties. Ibrahim literally transforms herself into the immigrant Egyptian father and while she slips in and out of characters, she manages to present a play about men and women struggling between identity and tradition in America.

Personifying *her father's last decisive moments in the U.S. waiting for a passport, Ibrahim becomes more understanding and finally realizes why kidnapping his child was the only solution left.* She has decided to create a show for her father and about him. She wanted to be in his shoes, and understand him from the inside. Therefore, she proves as Eckart Voigts-Virchow and Mark Schreiber discuss, "how character, especially in monologue or solo performance, increasingly gives way to 'permeable personae' and a highly self-reflexive play of impersonation"(7).

Using the transformative power of her body to carry the meaning and to create fictionalized characters and perform them brilliantly, Ibrahim draws the audience into the life of her characters; thereby achieving the power and success of the performance. Switching back and forth between different roles cultivating her body and transforming the self on stage, Ibrahim coincides with what Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins emphasize about the significance of the actor's body on stage:

In the theatre, the actor's body is the major physical symbol; it is distinguished from other such symbols by its capacity to offer a multifarious complex of meanings. The body signifies through both its appearance and its actions. As well as indicating such categories as race and gender, the performing body can also express place and narrative through skillful mime and/or movement. Moreover, it interacts with all other stage signifiers-notably costume,

set, and dialogue- and, crucially with the audience. It is not surprising, then, that the body functions as one of the most charged sites of theatrical representation (203).

Gilbert and Tompkins divide the "split" of the performing character into two kinds: while the first kind of monodrama, "expresses the split subjectivity of one character- hence, the transformations of the performing body are relatively subtle", in the second kind, "the actor 'splits' into a number of subjects, a process which usually requires radical metamorphoses, especially when the body shifts across categories such as race and gender"(233). Ibrahim belongs to the second type where she plays two different characters, shifting across both gender and race. She uses a single constantly transforming body to present the characters of the father and the daughter respectively. To do this, she utilizes voice and situational kinesics as well as proxemics to indicate shift in characters:"The body is inscribed and transformed in the nexus of actor / character / audience interaction"(Gilbert and Tompkins 234).

To signify shifts in character, *BABA* relies on staging location, Kinesics, linguistic variations and musical coding. The play uses the stage extensively so that the Denmo's body occupies all proxemic locations at some point. Ibrahim explains in the Preshow that the patriotic atmosphere in which the audience enters offer textures and times of Mohammed's world. For example, a video loop of the inaugural speech of Ronald Reagan, an American flag, signs that says *U.S. Passports only and All other aliens, foreigners, visitors here*, and 80's pop music and commercials. Besides, Television loops of news, game shows, and TV shows that may have played in their home such as *Bonanza*, *Wheel of Fortune*, and *The Facts of Life*; in addition to the music by Om Kalsum, Mohamed Abdel Wahab, and Comedies of Adel Emam.

Space is central in theatre analysis and has multiple functions in the communication and construction of meaning in performance. There are different special categories; "the one designating the space where the actors perform and includes set design is called scenic space or stage space. It is the, narrower realm where the performer acts and thereby transforms his or her surroundings" (Balme 54). Gilbert and Tompkins argue that the freedom of the empty stage and the prospect of solitude, audience notwithstanding, "prompt the performer to express parts of his/her self kept hidden in more public

The Power of Transformation in Denmo Ibrahim's BABA

situations. The variety of subjects that the monodrama generates helps redefine self and identity as the body metamorphoses into new, more varied personae"(233). The theatre lends itself to representations of temporal and spatial ambiguity because, as D. George puts it, "all performances create a here which is not 'here' and a now which is not 'now', restlessly slicing time and space into layers of difference"(74).

In a world where image is more powerful than words, "various characters can emerge out of space – a gesture, a vocal tone, or physical shift can be enough to suggest the world around them. The rhythm and actor's physicality of the story is as interwoven into the language of the piece as the text"(Berkely Para.4). Writing from this perspective, in his book *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, Keir Elam discusses the idea that in theatre any stage vehicle can stand, in principle, for any other. He cites structuralist writer Jindrich Honzl's influential argument that there are "no absolutely fixed representational relations"(13). So is the case with space. Conroy asserts that there is no need to show space pictorially or architecturally on stage. Instead, one can indicate space gesturally, verbally or acoustically. (33) *BABA* is staged in confined playing space to draw attention to the brave journey that unfolds. Two continents, three decades, one family with transfers in lighting, physicality, and costume supply everything required. The whole set is just two cases and a chair.

The dramatic performance turns to a set of signs where the actor's body is the fundamental sign. "When it is there it is looked at, and when it moves it attracts the audience's attention. And it is the way in which that body moves that communicates the nature of the action to the audience"(Harrop 18). Moreover, John Harrop continues, "all the visible and the aural elements of the stage contribute to the total meaning: vocal inflections, set, costume, make up, the actor's body"(10). Even the color of a costume, the shape of furniture or the hint of a gesture can generate meaning for the spectators in this performance.

Christopher Balme explains how theatrical signs are characterized by, "mobility" and "poly functionality" in the sense that, "signs on stage are by no means tied to their counterparts in the lived-in world... particular signs can actually change their function

during a performance...One and the same actor can play different roles or, in the case of monodrama, perform all the roles in a play without causing confusion on the part of the audience"(80). This is the case with *BABA*. For the most part, "all the props and people of Mohammed's world are mimed. However, in Layla's world, Ibrahim uses real objects and we briefly meet the other characters of her space. The suitcases act as architecture versus props framing Mohammed's space" (Berkeley Para3). This piece is full of both index signs, that are essentially gestural, and symbols where there is no immediately recognizable relationship between the signifier and the signified. Here the social body, whether masculine or feminine, is performed through the social dimensions of behaviors including language, movement, and so on.

Pierre Bourdieu notifies,

Strictly biological differences are underlined and symbolically accentuated by differences in bearing, differences in gesture, posture and behavior, which express a whole relationship to the social world. To these are added all the deliberate modifications of appearance, especially by the use of the set of marks- cosmetic (hairstyle, make-up, moustache, whiskers, etc.) or vestimentary – which, because they depend on the economic and cultural means that can be invested in them, function as social markers deriving their meaning and value from their position in the system distinctive signs which they constitute and which is itself homologous with the system of social positions. (192)

It is the experience and performance of these elements of distinction in the social body that creates, and asserts one's position in the social space. Following Judith Butler, the body becomes its gender through a series of corporeal acts, which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time (523).

Acting is transformative because of the processes that must be undertaken in order to embody a character. Denmo Ibrahim uses her body to represent on stage what happens in reality. She chooses to let her father tell his story through her. The play covers thirty years where, "a cyclical notion of time can be reproduced in theater"(Balme 142). The idea of a journey through time and space is crucial to Ibrahim's *BABA*. Two distinct stories are presented: whereas one follows Moe's last moments in the airport, the other

The Power of Transformation in Denmo Ibrahim's BABA

depicts the story of the daughter Layla, thirty years after his airport departure. Although these narratives are supposedly separated by the space of some thirty years, they are forcefully interwoven in the performative text. While establishing a present that looks backward to recover some aspects of the past, *BABA* also creates a past that looks forward into both the present and the future so that events in different time frames affect each other. Balme asserts,

Even though a performance is a linear event in real time, a movement-no matter how circular-from beginning to end, it allows for the representation of different temporal moments simultaneously ...performance is characteristically ephemeral, forcing a recognition of the role of the present in constructions of the past. (139)

The first act is set in U.S. Passport and Immigration Agency, NYC. Time: 1983, August. In the opening minutes, Ibrahim transforms herself into Moe, and then drops the audience into New York passport office where he battles bureaucracy while preparing to take his little daughter to his native Egypt. Ibrahim performs the role of Moe in a padded suit and mustache. While she reenacts his final day in the US in 1983, she carefully selects certain gestures, postures, and mannerisms to express feelings of embarrassment, anger, regret, and self-criticism.

Moe, the Egyptian immigrant and proud American, has been helplessly waiting in line at the passport office to pick up a passport for his 5-year-old daughter, Layla whom he intends to take to Egypt behind her mother's back: "Yes, she belongs to me. How old? Habibti, how old are you today? Five. Just last week. You think so? Definitely my nose. Seven months to finish her papers. But today it's ready. A passport for my daughter."(4)

While waiting in line at the passport office, Mohamed faces numerous provocative denials at the immigration agency and the official process gets more and more absurd - not legible, new forms to fill out and new documentation to provide: "No, no, no, problem. I can simply fill out the updated form and come again tomorrow."(8), used pencil instead of pen: "You used blue pen instead of black pen. We can only accept applications in black pen. They won't go through the

feeder."(10)

The use of gestures in communication results in an elaborate system of shifting gestural meaning. For example, using a wide range of head and hand gestures that are used frequently and elaborately every day, often to compliment, highlight or replace speech. Likewise, saying with the eyes is a common means of communication. To reflect daily interactions, Ibrahim relies upon exaggerated, extensive, and culturally specific use of expression and gesture. This is a hint to the ever-popular, stereotypical Egyptian head nod used frequently in day-to-day conversation and often replaces simple responses, for example, signifying an acknowledgement, an "ok", a gesture of agreement, a "yes", or a "no".

Besides, Moe is constantly chatting with other people in line: "Playwright/ performer Ibrahim creates characters so outgoing, funny and likeable, that they win you over almost immediately. It doesn't hurt that they are basically trying to chat you up — not with any particular intent, just as part of their way of being in the world"(Para.8):"You look so familiar. Really. I'm on the 81st floor. First tower in the World Trade Center. You looked so familiar. Kismet, we meet like this. I am sure we have been in the cafe together. Maybe the elevator, right? Not the gym. I'm sure."(13), and is flattering those who are giving him the runaround:" Mr. Bitterman. You look refreshed. I don't know how you do it. Really. I have been admiring you from a distance. Tell me your secret. A lot of the Americans here, they have bald spot, here, but you are full head of hair. So nicely styled all over to one side... I have filled out your updated application, as you have requested." (14) Berkeley comments, "Mohamed, the father, is one that, through repeated cultural circulation, we 'know' and recognize, but who in all probability does not actually exist. The father we see, then, is a recognizable cultural fiction and cannot be taken to be the 'real' of anything, although the story is positioned as 'real'"(Para 3).

In theatre, the sign created by the actor tends, because of its overwhelming reality, as Jiri Veltrusky puts it, "to monopolize the attention of the audience at the expense of the immaterial meanings conveyed by the linguistic sign; it tends to

divert attention from the text to the voice performance, from speeches to physical actions and even to the physical appearance of the stage figure" (115). *In BABA*, the audience is impressed by the gestures, movements, and sounds of the hilarious character of Moe. *Ibrahim's body in this act carries the meaning and is* treated as the locus for both culture and experience. Therefore, her body becomes a medium of culture.

Judith Butler in *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* advocates that the body is understood to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities. Consequently, it is more than the individual's perceptual centre of the world. (503) Thus, bodies become cultural texts read by the audience within a controlled and intentional context as an act of communication. So, "the thoughts of the audience are considered a social response to a shared cultural text"(Conroy 57).

Ibrahim relies upon the storytelling technique to reveal Moe's dreams, memories and frustrations in the first act. Ibrahim manipulates the multi dimensional space of the theatre, energizes the space of the stage, and shapes the social dynamics between performance and its audience. In her analysis of *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (1999), Gay McAuley explains that the presentational aesthetic is founded in the conscious artifice of storytelling conventions that assume a direct exchange between presenter and audience. She also defines the theatrical event as a, "dynamic process of communication in which the spectators are vitally implicated, one that forms part of a series of interconnected processes of socially situated signification and communication" (7).

McAuley's taxonomy of spatial function includes two categories of particular importance and relevance to Ibrahim's staging, namely the performance space of interaction between performers and spectators, and the physical/fictional relationship within presentational space.

When Moe starts to detail how his dreams have crumbled, he gives a sense of how fully he has chased the American dream and dedicated his life to trying to build a better life for his family. Earlier, he said to his wife: "We could

go to America; we could go to New York and begin a life together. We could imagine a family; a future together."(18). However, he continues, "This place does something to you. We were never in need. Maybe she wanted more. But we were never in need."(18)

The audience is constantly engaged because, as Dina Amin explains in her article *What's in a Hyphen?*, "the readers want to know about the lives of hyphenated/hybrid artists, asking:"Why do they write what they write? What stories have they to share with their audience? Invariably, there is an interest in the identity, background and life stories of hyphenated creators of art". (xi) Owing to the growing interest in their origins, hybrid artists have multiple reasons to create. As Amin puts it, "defensiveness is certainly an element, but there is also the wish to challenge stereotypes, sometimes even to shock the pigeon-holing reader/spectator...the works of hyphenated authors is always a process of negotiating identities"(xi). Ibrahim agrees with Amin that many hyphenated artists believe that their artistic productions are themselves representations of their identity and home, thus to know their work is to know them. "In their minds their art is the thing...it reflects notions of self and homeland"(Amin xi). This could an explanation to the play's subtitle: *A One Woman Show Journey into Family, Faith, and Freedom*.

Bitterly, Moe describes how, unlike his ambitious wife, he has failed to assimilate or even cope and be identified as American: "I worked hard to be here. To get HERE. I *am* American. I want to be identified as American. I want to travel under the American umbrella."(16) Ibrahim, as Gay Morris puts it "eschews naturalistic dialogue in favor of a direct address that generally historicizes the action, calling for an intellectual response rather than merely an aesthetic appreciation"(98). She creates the play's frame, "interrupting the action and breaking structural patterns to highlight the different sites of dramatic interaction by dispersing the viewer's focus"(98) Ibrahim by performing the character of Moe confirms Joseph Roach's definition of "Theatrical performance as, "the simultaneous experience of mutually exclusive possibilities—truth and illusion, presence and absence, face and

mask" (559).

One of the signs of the wife's gradual transformation and succeeding assimilation used in the performance is the exchange of the Egyptian food with the American junk food. Here the food becomes a symbol of the fact that has succeeded to abandon her Egyptian identity smoothly and embrace the American one. Unlike her confused husband, Mohamed's wife has gradually managed to assimilate and has become totally absorbed in the American community. Actually, one can say that he did not sell her identity but she was taken by the American life and preferred to meet all the challenges and stay in the new community. However, her husband lacked both her persistence and perseverance. Thus, transformation for the wife was much easier and more fluid. Mohamed remembers:

When we first came to this country, my wife would cook food from home, lahma min rose, kofta, mashi. Mashi -- they're stuffed peppers. It takes a day and a half to prepare but it's so delicious. Moolukaya – it's like a thin green soup– I don't know what makes it so delicious. Yeah. Really, my wife always had the gift of spice. But I don't know what happened... This is why it's so hard here. So many rules, regulations. How can you keep up? You can't. That's the point. Back home, some things never change. The woman cook and clean, the men work for a living. Simple. But here, too ambitious. It's not good. How can it be? Family means I give to you and you give to me. Not I give to you and you take from me. What is that? You understand? She is selfish. America. I want my daughter to know the meaning, really of one for all. (13)

The wife has had two miscarriages and for no clear reasons, she asks for a divorce and full custody of the baby girl. The miscarriages stand for failure, disappointment, helplessness and hopelessness. They correspond to the troubles the couple has been facing regarding their inability to deal with each other. After transformation, the wife could no longer deal with the unbalanced frustrated husband.

I still remember her face. She was sad but not surprised. And she looked at me and said, I don't know what

happened. Now it's lawyers and papers and weekend visits. I say let me just talk to her. She won't accept my call. So I go and visit, with flower. She calls the police. I'm no criminal. I just want my family back. We can live separate for a little while but then enough is enough. Every marriage has hard times. That is the same all over the world. But she thinks differently. She wants a divorce and full custody. Being here, something changed. (24)

Lonely and discouraged, Moe finally decides to take Layla to Egypt claiming: "Who needs America? What is America to me? I have everything I need. Right here." (25) This is a manifestation of his disappointment and collapsed ability to find himself a place in the American society. He gives up because he can no longer take it. However, he also fails to achieve his final dream and is arrested at the airport after being accused of having been trying to steal the child: "How can I steal my own child? I made her. She belongs to me." (27) Uselessly, he tries to justify and hence throws more light on the irreconcilable gap created between him and his wife. The only truth left is that there is no more of a family left:

She is an unfit mother. Being here something changed. But I never laid a hand on her. She can do whatever she wants. Her life is hers. If she wants to come home late and leave early, fine. I won't ask questions. But she is my child. I will not leave her, not like that. I am a hard working man. I have done everything by the book. This is my marriage certificate. A copy of our lease on Ridge Way. Proof of our first joint bank account. My first paycheck. Her first paycheck. And her bonus. And her promotion. This is when we were still a family. The nice Christmas. The gift I gave. Look. Look closely. This is the drawing she made for me in kindergarten. A letter from my wife. A pen from her desk. Evidence of a 'work' trip. A picture of her boyfriend. She left us. And I'm being accused. This is not right. You have no idea what it means to leave everything you know, come here, and then lose it all. You cannot know. (27-28)

Family meant everything to the severely wronged husband. When the family collapsed, he lost everything. Therefore, kidnapping his child was the only option left to him. The child was all what was left of the family and became a symbol of hope. She was the solitary

The Power of Transformation in Denmo Ibrahim's BABA

way to preserve tradition and transmit it to future generations. In an attempt to maintain his culture, Moe has been frequently using Arabic words and proverbs such as, "Habibiti", "Mashi", "Radeena' Abel Hem, Well Hem Mish Ruhdee Deena, though realizing that no one will understand." Ibrahim herself did not know the meaning of these words but used them in her performance in order to attain credibility and confirm the Arabic identity on the American stage. Even the title *BABA* is intentionally chosen to accomplish the same objective.

Berkeley notifies,

Through a hilarious portrayal of the absurdities foreigners deal with in America on a daily basis, one discovers that this performance is about a deeply flawed man who is not just heading home for a vacation. At first, 'Baba' seems to be a character study, a humorous one, of an Egyptian expatriate in New York City, trying, cajoling, flattering, half-threatening every bureaucrat at the Passport Bureau, as he tries to extract a passport for his little daughter, whom he speaks to in asides and directly, as he does others in the office, engaging them in chit-chat. But darker moments of monologue, undercutting his sunny immigrant's exterior, belie a deeper purpose. (Para. 2)

The use of space in this act was generally more contained, preventing irregular, big, or rigorous body movements. Instead, sustained, fluid and smaller ones were observable. This corresponds to the hesitant, nervous and confused personality of Moe. To occupy a small space in many ways implies a low position. Moreover, the monologue in this act has predominantly focused attention on the speaker and the way he has been expressing himself and talking about his life. In this case, "language, the dynamics of narrative and linguistic elements, is, as a result, foregrounded" (Wallace *Monologue Theatre...*, 6). Performance in this act has predominantly been representational where the audience has been attached through both language and gestures.

However, the situation changes after the conclusion of the part of "Moe". In the second act, there is that of "Layla," the grown daughter, in the airport and aboard a jet to Cairo, to meet her father

for the first time as an adult. Berkley on the part of Moe saying that, "the first scene or sketch is a little earthier, in the sense of Moe presenting himself, either too ingenuously or rather disingenuously, as a regular American guy, albeit from Egypt, happy to be in the States, though beleaguered in his attempt to communicate with bureaucrats"(Para.4).

Here, in the second part, Layla occupies several spaces and this coincides with her openness, confidence and freedom: the second act is set in the JFK Security Checkpoint, Airport Bar, Gate 49B, Airplane, Baggage Claim, and Cairo. Time: Now, August.

The set for the second half is very simple; done mainly with lighting. In the second act, lights and sound change suddenly, and the audience finds himself in a different place and at a different time; it is three decades later: As Mohamed is gone, lights change, and music begins. He then starts transforming; he takes off his jacket and spreads it out on the chair. After that, he takes off the fat suit, and has Layla's purple dress on underneath. He takes off the wig, and takes down her hair, putting everything that Moe has rejected into the lap of the jacket, which Layla then wraps up, and puts inside the suitcase. She pulls out an over-the-shoulder bag, checks her suitcase, and goes through airport security. Then lights change again, and she is at the gate for her plane:"She dresses accessories, shoes, jacket, scarf, and glasses. Picks up large handbag."(30) The chair that was Moe's during the first half of the show becomes now Layla's seat on the airplane.

Being American, Layla does not face the same routine and finishes the procedures smoothly. To kill time, she goes to the bar. The Bar is imagined, and is defined by light and sound. Again, Denmo is the only actor onstage, and when she speaks to other characters, their responses are imagined. Like her father, she is talkative and friendly:" Where are you from? Originally. Definitely a brown place. Spain. Greece. Italy. Not Italy. Turkish? Iran. Iraq. Kuwait. Don't. Wait. Let me guess. Israeli. I knew it. My best friend is from Israel. Originally...Me? Egypt. I'm going to meet my dad."(33)

Dee Heddon explains that in performances of the 'self', there are always at least two selves on stage the self that is performing,

The Power of Transformation in Denmo Ibrahim's BABA

and the self that is being performed; the self is inevitably in dialog with the self: "In this kind of theater, the self sets up a dialogue with the self in a series of performative acts that blur the borderline between monologue and dialogue: The performing subject and the subject of performance are typically one and the same. The functions of author and performer are welded together "(184). This is exactly what happens when Ibrahim starts to play the role of Layla. Thus, performance in this part is primarily presentational. This is chiefly because the performer is more or less presenting her character.

Berkley argues,

After Ibrahim performs the role of Moe in a padded suit and mustache, embodying the man's gentle frustration bordering on desperation with such authenticity, it becomes now fascinating to watch her shed off her man's attire to become herself and transform gracefully into Moe's daughter, decades later. The adult Layla is in many ways very different from Moe — a self-assured young Californian woman rather than a heavily accented and amiably nervous man — but Ibrahim deftly creates Layla as very much her father's daughter. She's a similarly outgoing extrovert, chatting with everyone around her in sometimes amusingly parallel ways. (Para4)

Layla is different from both her parents. The father, on the one hand, gave up and was obliged to go back to his country in an attempt to restore himself, and decided to live in "Musr Gadida" which is Americanized with cafes to find "the best of both worlds." On the other hand, the mother was totally assimilated and decided to sell her identity and embrace the American one. Dissimilarly, Layla fell in between and became a hybrid who does not know Arabic: "I don't speak Arabic. My parents only spoke English to me."(44)

Layla throws light on some Arabic traditions that she knows but never applies. She talks about her mother to an imaginary partner saying:

That's the fifth conversation I've had with her today. And I'm not even on the plane yet. I kid you not. But to be far she only really gets like this when I travel. She changes. I've got to call her when I'm leaving and when I arrive at

the airport, after security, once I'm at the gate. And then just before I board. And when I land. It's too much for anyone. But what are you going to. It's a collective energy. All the women in the Arab community do this. (34)

Layla was raised Muslim but has never been into religion: "First generation Arab American... There were so many decisions to make as a teenager, most of which were bad, wrong or ignored. But they were easy to remember. Don't have sex. Don't do drugs. Don't show thigh. It's an insult to the religion. My dad? I didn't know him. When I was young. I just don't think he was cut out for family life. At least that's what I've been told. I don't take it personally."(35) Layla's words prove that the wife, though Americanized, has kept some of the basic traditions whom she felt she could never do without. Layla's words also reveal that the wife, on her side, was accusing her husband of not being that dedicated to his family. In other words, he did not do enough to support his family owing to his unending failure and lack of confidence. As a result, Layla believes that she is the only hope left for the future and admits that this lays a lot pressure on her: "I can't get away with anything. The possibilities of screwing up are endless. And clearly, I'm the only hope for the future. My options for a good free life are medicine, law or computer science. At least anything better than accounting. Otherwise its basically prostitution. That's a lot of pressure, being the first American." (36)

At last, Layla has decided to meet the man she has never known. She needed to receive some answers and understand the man better:

I have family there. I'm going to meet my dad...I go to see family...We lost touch many years ago... But then when I turned 30, I felt like I was hiding something. Or rather something was hidden. And I just wanted to know more. Who was this guy? What was he like? How was his life? The point is it's incomplete. After awhile, you just get used to the half story you were told. But eventually, you just kind of want to know the whole thing...Miss him? No. It's not like that. What if he doesn't recognize me? What

The Power of Transformation in Denmo Ibrahim's BABA

if he does? Not sure which is better. I guess I'll at least come out with a good story. (40-41)

When asked about what inspired her to write this play, Ibrahim answered: "The truth -- I so badly wanted to make something up that was clever, witty, and insightful. In the end, it was the truth that won. You can't make this stuff up. I took a heartbreaking tale full of love, loss, paranoia, and a battle of custody and made it ridiculous"(Harrison Para.5). The play ends at the port's gate with Layla calling out for her father's name and the call to prayer is called. The call for prayer is a metaphor of new beginnings, new hope.

Byrne Harrison believes that the play, "looks at what we leave behind in our search for the American dream," and adds that from the perspective of the eternal foreigner living in the U.S., the show, "smashes traditional clown, vaudeville, and bouffant with real life accounts of an incredibly heartbreaking tale -- a patriotic Egyptian immigrant, who will always be seen as an outsider despite his ability to vote"(Para.2).

Certainly, sometimes a powerful experience at the theater can come from merely stepping into someone else's world. Such an opportunity is available in Denmo Ibrahim's *BABA*. Convinced that theatre is the place where one can be everything and anything all at once, Ibrahim has chosen to come closer to her life and rely on something real to draw from. She used the transformative power of her body and relied upon gesture and movement to perform a play that covers thirty years and two continents and tells the story of both love and forgiveness between an American-born daughter and the memory of her estranged Egyptian immigrant father who failed to adjust to the New York City life.

Through a funny, solo show about what it means to be an Arab American, Ibrahim managed to represent a piece that is both presentational and representational. She was completely absorbed in the characters of both the father and the daughter alike. She depicted the dream and the struggle of a foreigner who has been defying all odds to get his U.S. passport minutes before departure and the daughter who has been, three decades later, in search of her origin to

Hala Sayed

discover the man she never knew. Meanwhile, the Ibrahim was constantly aware of the audience's existence. She has been fixedly addressing it both directly through language and indirectly through gestures and movements.

The playwright relied upon her wit, physicality, poetic language and understanding of her characters to make her story both touching and humorous. The classic, all-American story of the immigrant hoping for a better life has been performed in a stunning and revelatory manner where the body of Ibrahim was transformed into a sign of an imaginary human being who has his own reality within the context of the play. Behind the sign of the actor, remained the real human being who has been in a journey searching for family, faith and freedom. *BABA* is one of the most amazing transformations that could ever be witnessed on stage that provides a unique look at the illusion of the American Dream.

Works Cited

- Balme, Christopher B. *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Print.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Logic of Practice*. R. Nice, transl. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990. Print.
- Brousse, Charles. "Flying Solo." *Pacific Sun*. 25 March 2014.
- Bullock, Ken. "Theater Reviews: Two Solo Shows--Denmo Ibrahim in 'Mo;' Jeff Garrett in 'QED' FOR Indra's Net." *The Berkeley Daily Planet* 11 April 2010.
- Conroy, Colette. *Theater and the Body*. Palgrave: Macmillan, 2010. Print.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40 (4):519-531.
- Elam, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, 1980. London: Routledge, 1980. Print.
- Gilbert, Helen and Joanne Tompkins. *Post-Colonial Drama, Theory, Practice, Politics*. London: Gilbert and Tompkins, 1996. Print.
- Harrison, Byrne. FRIGID New York Interview - Denmo Ibrahim of "FUNNY A Trunk Show." STAGEBUZ.COM. 26 February 2011.
- Harrop, John. *Acting*. USA: Rutledge, 1992. Print.
- Heddon, Dee. "Beyond the Self: Autobiography as Dialogue." *Solo Performance*. 6 May 2011: 184.
- Hill, Holly and Dina Amin (eds.) *Salaam. Peace: An Anthology of Middle Eastern-American Drama*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009. Print.
- Hurwitt, Sam. "Theater review: Father, daughter come to life in Alter Theater one-woman show." *Entertainment* 4 September 2014.
- Ibrahim, Denmo. *BABA: One Woman Journey into Family, Faith, and Freedom*. San Fransisco, CA 94102, 2014. Print.

Hala Sayed

*Kickstarter. "Soulo - Totnes Solo Theatre Festival." 2014
Kickstarter, Inc. McAuley, Gay. Space in Performance:
Making Meaning in the Theatre. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan
P, 1999. Print.*

Roach, Joseph. "It." *Theatre Journal* 56.4 (2004): 555–68.

Salti, Ramzi. "Denmo Ibrahim's BABA." *ARABOLOGY*. 6 April
2014.

Veltrusky, Jiri. "Dramatic Text as a Component of Theatre." In L.
Matejka and I Titunik (eds.) (1976):94-117.

Wallace, Clare. "Monologue Theatre, Solo Performance and Self as
Spectacle." Charles University, Prague- Academia.edu.

---, ed. *Monologues: Theatre, Performance, Subjectivity.*
Comparative Drama by Maria Kurdi. Prague: Literraria
Pragensia, 2006. Print.