

TEATRO DI NASCOSTO – HIDDEN THEATRE

Regional government of Tuscany, provincial government of Pisa, town council of Volterra, Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio of Volterra, Cassa di Risparmio of Volterra, Tavolo per la Pace Alta Bassa Val di Cecina, NOVA Barcelona and Iraqi Al Amal Association

In the UK: Pegasus Theatre (Oxford), the RicNic Trust, Jenny Lewis (Oxford University), Student Amnesty (Oxford University), European Cultural Foundation



Voices of Baghdad, Poster: Pontedera, October 2011; Photo: Erbil, October 2011

VOICES OF BAGHDAD: theatre reportage

From Baghdad, to Erbil, to Florence, Pisa, Pontedera and Volterra, to **Oxford (July 2012)**

The Iraqi people have lived through three wars in the last three decades and bombs continue to claim tens of lives of civilians and security officials every month across Iraq, in Baghdad, Karbala, Kirkuk...

To have the four Iraqi actors and their director come to the UK **to tell *their* stories**, we need £6531: £3350 for flights, £716 for visas and insurance, £360 for the festival fee, £800 for travel and other expenses within the UK, £1305 for director subvention and administration in Iraq and the UK. **And we need your help to make this happen.**

"I want to make the world know what is going on in Iraq, where we have to fight to make art, to communicate with the world, to scream we are still alive and able to make a new Iraq" Yasir Kareem

Teatro di Nascosto – Hidden Theatre remains an independent company, a non-profit cultural association unaffiliated with any political party relying on support from the public sector, cultural organisations, and private donations. Please contact Arabella Lawson or Annet Henneman for further information (see Contact details at the end)

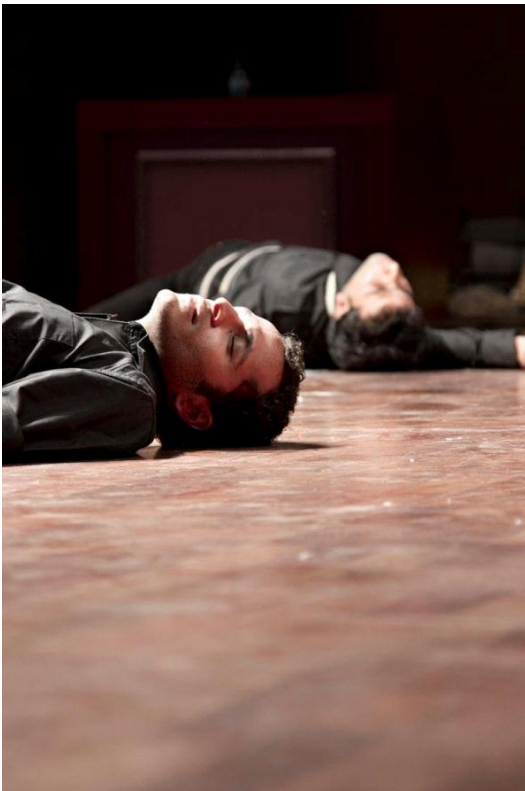
Voices of Baghdad

On 31st October 2010 Our Lady of Salvation Catholic Church in Baghdad became the bloody scene of yet another explosion leaving 58 people dead.

In October 2011, in the building opposite the remains of the church, four young Iraqi actors, under the direction of Annet Henneman, devised and rehearsed for a performance of theatre reportage that tells of the violence that does not stop in their city against Christians, Muslims, soldiers, civilians.

Voices of Baghdad are those of ordinary Iraqi citizens: four little boys playing 'count the dead soldiers' on the road from Basra; four young men singing for their country and a woman fighting to have her voice heard; four little boys marching to war; one young Muslim man singing Hallelujah for the 58 victims of yet another explosion. These are the stories of growing up in Iraq, through three decades of wars, under or in exile from the government of Saddam Hussein, amid the ongoing violence that leaves a society challenged to overcome hatred, suspicion and bitterness, and a generation of young people fighting to rebuild their country on instability and insecurity.

This performance premiered in **Erbil** at a conference for the Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative. Then in October 2011, the four Iraqi actors came across to Italy supported by the regional government of Tuscany, the provincial government of Pisa, the town council of Volterra, Tavolo per la pace, Al Amal (hope) Iraq, and others to perform with Annet in schools and theatres in Florence, Pisa, Pontedera, Pomerance and as part of the Incontri-Meetings festival in Volterra, hosted by Teatro di Nascosto.



The **Pegasus Theatre** (Oxford) has now invited Annet and the four young men to perform *Voices of Baghdad* in the international theatre festival **MESH** from **19th-29th July** this year, 2012, to participate in and contribute to the ten days of workshops, activities and debates. (Please find full information in the following pages.)

The value of bringing *Voices of Baghdad* to the UK is not only in sharing with other young theatre practitioners a high quality performance of original work, and a very particular practice of theatre, but also in the platform opened to ordinary people in Iraq, a country whose day to day reality is not accessible to the British public, to communicate their own stories directly from Baghdad, Nasiriya, Karbala. From the shared activities, workshops and debates surrounding both theatre and broader issues of international human rights can be born projects of collaboration and exchange, not to mention personal interest amongst young artists coming from all over the world in maintaining a sensitivity to individual lives,



communities, art in countries whose people are too often clouded by politics.

Reactions to *Voices of Baghdad* (Erbil, October 2011)

[Claudia, Iraqi Children's Art]

The play, *Voices of Baghdad*, was amazing. Four young Iraqi men, dressed in very basic, uniform clothing that featured a long kaki colored strap wrapped in different ways to create a pattern around their upper bodies. Annette Henneman, the Italian woman, who has worked with them to create the play is dressed in black, head covered looking like a middle-aged Iraqi woman. For the most part it is in Arabic. The four men tell their stories using the straps as their only props. Sometimes they tangle themselves up, sometimes they lead each other around the stage. Sometimes they are connected; other times they are on their own.

There are stories from childhood, one about a boy's seven year wait for his father [sic] to come home from war and about the terror of home invasions by [sic.] Saddam's soldiers. Sometimes the four are calm and quiet, lying on the floor and then they are soldiers standing up, moving quickly and making loud shooting noises, fighting, stabbing, dying. Every now and then the woman speaks in English, telling an abbreviated version for non-Arab speakers. Sometimes she is an actor. But, no matter what is being said, we get the drift. **It is like an opera, so evocative that I think I know what is being said and it is all very, very sad.**

I am sitting in the front row of an audience of 100 or so people, mostly Iraqis. At first, we don't quiet down, there is talking and people are moving around. But as the play moves on things change. I can feel the room gathering around behind me, focused on what is taking place in front of us. **The man next to me is shaking his leg so violently that I am also shaking.** Periodically he gives his cell phone to someone next to the stage, and asks for a photo. A cell phone rings a few seats down on the other side and to my amazement, the man takes a call and talks quietly. Next to him two very well dressed women are talking again. How can this be? I shift in my seat as a request that they be silent. Then, at some point I think I begin to understand what is going on. **This is a play about a certain reality for me, but it IS their reality,** I begin to imagine how difficult it is to relive this and I stop shifting in my seat.

At some points, people clap and sing along with the actors. They burst into applause after monologues that I cannot understand. We are with them every step of the way now. **I am weeping, they are weeping, we are all swept up in the drama unfolding in front of us** after a long day of meetings and discussions at a conference in Erbil, in northern Iraq. We have been talking about the very serious problems that continue in the country. We are meeting to discuss and formulate strategies and plans of action --ways civil society organizations can help. The context, the background to our discussions is playing out in front of us.

In the final scene, one of the young men is getting married. A drum appears and the singing begins. The five of them are dancing...really dancing, smiling and clapping and moving in wild celebration. After some minutes they dance off the stage. These last moments have transported us away from our sorrows, we feel the possibility that tomorrow could be better a better day. **What a magnificent ending.**

We jump to our feet, clapping and trilling. The actors bow with solemn pleasure. This was their first performance. People jump onto the stage hugging, exclaiming and posing for photographs. **It is a triumph.** I met Annette earlier in the day, and spent a long time talking with her about Baghdad and theatre. I give her a huge hug and think--next summer in Northampton.

I am still crying.... The experience is profound--we sit facing a difficult truth together, led through the darkness to experience the other side--the possibility for real joy and reconciliation.

Full account: <http://iraqichildrensart.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/voice-of-baghdad.html>





حتى انت الربيت بهاي العيون



"Theater is a message of humanity and I want to sing this message... as we tell our stories of the wars and violence in Iraq" Fouad Hanoon



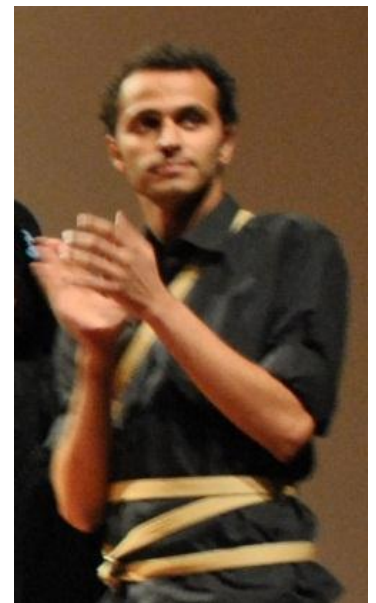
Ali Kaream



Fouad Hanoon



Mostafa Al Lami



Yasir Kareem



Annet Henneman

Director: Annet Henneman

Assistant Director: Ali Kaream Obaid Aldrawsha

Actors: Fouad Hanoon Hadi Alhchaimi, Ali Kaream Obaid Aldrawsha, Yasir Kareem Yasir, Mostafa Rahman Issa Lami, Annet Henneman

Managing Assistant: Arabella Lawson

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Annet Henneman and her work

Annet Henneman (Director, actress and co-founder of Teatro di Nascosto – Hidden Theatre)

Originally from Holland, qualified (BA) as a drama teacher, Annet subsequently trained and practised theatre in Holland, Poland, Germany and Italy under internationally renowned theatre practitioners including Jerzy Grotowski and Ryszard Cieslak. With Armando Punzo she founded the Carte Blanche cultural association and worked with the Compagnia della Fortezza in Italy for eight years. In 1998 she founded Teatro di Nascosto with Gianni Calastri and has since been developing theatre reportage, a hybrid of art and journalism, using theatre as a vehicle to tell the true stories of people who do not have a voice, who are living out the consequences of war, oppression or desperate poverty. Travelling to live beside and among those people whose stories she tells, her work has taken her to Kurdistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, India, Jordan and Palestine. Working to support refugees and asylum seekers in Italy, Teatro di Nascosto set up the Academy of Theatre Reportage for Refugees and Asylum-seekers in Volterra. Students trained as actors, telling their stories through theatre and producing performances such as *Rifugia-ti*, played before the European Parliament in 2007 with a cast of refugees, politicians and actors. Annet continues to travel between Europe and the Middle East, aiming to serve as a channel for the voices and true stories she hears.

Theatre reportage: theatre for human rights

There are boatfuls of people arriving into Italy, asking for asylum; there is a woman who has just been arrested a second time for her participation in the silent demonstration in Tehran in 2009; there are 250 people who have just been killed in explosions in Kirkuk, Baghdad, Karbala; there is silence in Sulaymaniyah because every outspoken journalist is in prison.

But these words can mean nothing.

Theatre reportage puts eyes, faces, bodies before the audience, because these are real stories.

Annet Henneman travels to and from Baghdad, hosted by and working with the women of Al Amal, passing through endless checkpoints to rehearse with the young actors in a city full of bombs; to Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah to interview the threatened employees of an independent television station, take part in the joyful demonstrations of the Kurdish New Year.

She has just returned from Baghdad and Iraqi Kurdistan. Her performances of *Don't Forget Us*, *Voices of Baghdad*, her diaries and interviews continue to tell what is not being told.

Annet Henneman's continued work in Iraq

In the last two years Annet Henneman's work has been commissioned and supported by organisations such as **Laonf**, the **Iraqi Al Amal Association**, **Tavolo per la Pace** (Italy) and **NOVA Barcelona** (Spain) in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan in initiatives working for peace and reconciliation and the protection of civil and human rights.

Annet returned to Baghdad and Iraqi Kurdistan February-March 2012, continuing to work with Al Amal, preparing for a project addressing the issues of freedom and independence for women while also preparing and planning a tour in Iraq of *Voices of Baghdad* (Baghdad, Basra, Nasiriyah) and its visit to the UK in July 2012.

The picture above is that of some of the 58 victims of the bomb attack on Our Lady of Salvation Church on 31st October 2010.



After a performance of **DON'T FORGET US**
March 2012, Baghdad



MESH FESTIVAL, Pegasus Theatre, Oxford, 19-29th July 2012

Mesh 2012 - Oxford Youth Arts International

Theme

Our theme for the year is perfectly timed to share in the Olympic International spirit, as it focuses on young people and the Human Rights principles of Freedom, Respect, Equality and Dignity.

Each visiting group will bring a prepared production, which will be performed to and discussed by the other participants involved in the festival as well as to the general public.

Who is involved?

Mesh is hosted by Pegasus Theatre in partnership with the North Wall Arts Centre, Oxford Inspires, Oxford International Link and Oxford City Council. The Planning Group for the festival involves both young people and professional staff members. There will be up to 100 young people from the UK and 8 groups from Europe and beyond totaling another 100 young people.

Outline of Mesh 2012

Each day the young people will work in mixed international workshop groups with professional directors to create a finale performance and procession to be performed in Oxford city centre to be shown to a public audience.

The festival will involve the young people in watching performances, discussing and debating what they have seen, working in international workshop groups to create the finale piece, participating in skills based workshops to learn new art forms from different cultures, as well as some time to socialize and get to know each other. There will be an interactive Grand Debate focusing on Human Rights and young people's Mental Health.

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