

## The atrocity exhibition

**Reza Aramesh** restages scenes from the disasters of war in England's stately homes. He tells *Chris Lord* about his search for truth in tragedy

It's the early '70s and Jane Fonda meets with Vietnamese communists in Hanoi. Her hair clings to her face in the humidity, her eyes are shadowed with mascara and sympathy. In an iconic photograph, snapped for *L'Express* newspaper, we see her camera strap around her neck and, just beyond, a beleaguered Vietnamese man shuffling past.

Reza Aramesh, like filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard before him, is fascinated by this image. 'What is this photograph about?' asks the Iranian artist. 'Is it about Jane Fonda, or is it supposed to be about the Vietnamese but it's actually about her? How about, as they took the photograph, she was really thinking about her kids. Or maybe she's staging all this herself – she's an actor so she's thinking about the camera angle and the shot. What if she was just thinking about her next contract?'

The image was the sole focus of a short film, *Letter to Jane*, that Godard made in 1972. It sought to pick through these layers that we can perhaps, with enough reading, glimpse in the image. Aramesh searches for these layers in his own vast archive of photographs. He takes cuttings from world media: blindfolded Patah loyalists, an Iraqi woman crying over the body of a relative and a Tibetan protestor arrested near a Chinese Embassy.

Aramesh selects an image and begins editing. He might cross out a gunman or scrub over a blindfold. He tries to bring forward details that become smothered in the



overwhelming 'sound' of the media. 'I think that war reportage is presented so you can see horror in a glance,' Aramesh says with chilling accuracy. 'It is in the way that they focus on certain elements, exaggerate things. The attention is drawn to that horror and you forget about going any further in reading an image.' Slowly, his edited images become singular storyboards that he will use to direct and photograph a group of non-professional actors at opulent homes around England.

'It is exactly the same image, but my focus goes somewhere less loud,' he explains. So, for an image of Iraqis guarded by an Egyptian soldier in the Gulf War, Aramesh chops out the guard and with a play of light turns the focus on one bare-chested prisoner rising on his knees. We become acutely conscious of the prisoner's nakedness as the light hits him, expressions are heightened by the shadows and, in the distance, a sculpted English garden replaces Kuwaiti desert.

We ask Aramesh to describe this 'sound' of the media. 'In *Music At Night*, Aldous Huxley talks about pure tragedy,' he explains. 'Say your lover or your brother dies and you're totally devastated. But still you want to eat, still you are hungry.'

### 'Any of us could be oppressor and any of us the victim here'

That, Aramesh and Huxley agree on, is the whole truth – the layers of reality that continue to exist in spite of overwhelming tragedy. Life as it's lived, something which both the theatre and the media lose in their search for horror. 'The expression of tragedy becomes a roar,' says Aramesh. 'I'm interested in that which is totally dismissed, those things that the camera is not really capturing but what's around them.'

The title of the show, *Between The Eye And The Object Falls A Shadow*, comes from one of William S. Burroughs' prose sketches. Asking why people are always so bored, Burroughs uses the line to say that people 'can't see what is right under their eyes' and the shadow of their 'pre-recorded' ideas obscures their vision. The real project in all of these works is an attempt to unlearn these media images around us. He is disrupting the way we apprehend tragedy and, in doing so, reminds us of the horrifying, grisly truth of the matter. The ever-present wash of atrocities, rendered in word and

image, do not so much desensitise us as lead us into knowing a shape of tragedy too well, almost to the point of nonchalance.

Eliminating the drama (all his actors are in very normal street clothes, and there's an occasional glimmer of disbelief in their eyes), he slows the pace of an image and, in doing so, draws us back to the essential humanity that is lost in a momentary reading. He breaks down the shape of tragedy. Suddenly, nakedness becomes vulnerability, the curiosity of a bystander is not lost but appears somehow naive. Human tragedy is made human again; it is not dislocated, other-side-of-the-world theatricality.

But that's not to suggest that these works are a philosophical puzzle to be muddled through. For all their obvious artifice, they're still pointed reminders that we are all human beings, very much alive among the visual roar of atrocities. As Aramesh puts it, 'Any of us could be oppressor and any of us the victim here.' *B21 (04 340 3965). Until May 7*