

Dissent Overruled!

Shirin Neshat's "OverRuled" performed at Cedar Lake Theatre, New York is reviewed by Bhakti Shringarpure

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Shirin Neshat's latest performance is terrifying to say the least. The cheerful camaraderie among the fashionable and artsy crowd on a freezing New York night turned quickly into silent intimidation as people filed into the cavernous gallery space, which was flanked on both sides by rows by men in green military uniforms and combat boots. The eighteen soldiers glared stoically into the void as we took

our seats. On the center stage, another ten or so men – bureaucratic clerks - shuffled about officiously in starched white shirts in what we quickly came to recognize as a dilapidated courtroom, with an ornate throne for the judge at the center and strewn with ancient manuscripts, dusty files and wooden panels beaten down by time. Red-cloaked rock musicians – guitar and drums on stage-right, trombone and keys on stage-left – further drive the atmospheric dissonance, loosing squibs of sound as if in clandestine conversation.

Just as the audience began to get comfortable, the stern, bearded judge (played by veteran Iranian actor Mohammed Ghaffari) issued a startlingly commanding "All rise" and, to a person, the audience obeyed (sitting again, with equal obedience, upon his next command). Neshat's performance had thus made its first point: We had been propelled as participants into the cold and harsh mechanisms of an autocratic world ruled by blind adherence to tradition. As stated in *OverRuled's* billing: "The theocratic law seeks vengeance, while engulfed in absurdity of its own making, relying on the ensemble of military men who are vessels of its might."



The trial commenced and the judge called for a singular defendant, but four of them rose from the audience and headed toward the stage: The accused, thus, was a collective protagonist, a common person, one drawn from amongst us. The defendant is accused of having incited youth to rally against the religious government, an offense meriting the wrath of god. Each of the four defendants is keen to take

the blame and offer soliloquys rich with arguments against the nature of god, against the binary between god and the devil, against the rational versus the sensual. As the two male and two female performers spoke in outbursts of emotion and fury, the men in white (the clerks of the court) linked arms with their backs to audience, forming a white wall upon which images of innocent youth and women are projected. They are the faces of Iran's recent Green revolution, which was crushed by the regime. The performance alternated between monologues and songs, the latter performed by Iran's famous contemporary musician Mohsen Namjoo, who is the piece's composer

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and also plays one of the four defendants.

A glance through the program revealed yet another subtle layer to cutting legal farce: Namjoo, one of Iran's most celebrated artists, was sentenced in absentia by Iranian courts to a five-year jail term for allegedly ridiculing an asura of the Koran in one of his songs, his album banned in Iran; and two of the other musicians, members of the Iranian rock band 127, are barred from recording music in their own country. The theater's very air, then, was filled with illicit elements.

The entwined themes of enlightenment and censorship are beautifully illustrated here, not just through the writing, but also through poignant symbolism laced throughout. For example, at one point in the performance, the white-shirted clerks begin to pile book upon book on the judge's table until he is literally overwhelmed, the power of knowledge too much for him: He shoves the books away in frustrated violence so as to maintain his role as the autocratic emissary of God, and proceeds to sentence the defendants with a vengeance.

Neshat, in partnership with playwright Shoja Azari, has taken the story of a young Sufi mystic Mansur Al-Hallaj, who was tried and dismembered for heresy in 922 AD, as the starting point for reflecting upon the present crisis of religious tyranny in Iran. Verses from the *Tawasin*, from Mansur Al-Hallaj, form the crux of the play's text. Sufism, which throughout history has come under scrutiny for expounding views and practices that are often on the fringes of mainstream Islam, offers Neshat the perfect platform from which to view the multi-faceted nature of the divine and to offer a critique of singular politicized interpretations of it with regard to Iran. The defendants of *OverRuled* even use diagrams from the *Tawasin* in beautifully composed scenes in which giant scrolls are unfurled illustrating, for example, Al-Hallaj's theory of concentric circles: The first circle is the literal sense, then there is inner sense, and finally "allusion," which is the third circle. These represent the totality of things and build upon notions of truth, perfection, the absolute, the infinite, and so on – all illustrated geometrically.

By employing the life and verse of Al-Hallaj, Neshat and Azari's overt political denunciation of censorship, theocracy and oppression in Iran becomes inherently foolproof, based on the evocation of theories of the divine within Islam itself. *OverRuled* thus offers not the crude, sweeping and othered opposition to Islam, as one may experience in the West, but instead enters it from within and delves into the whole problem with a caring, intellectual and humanist premise.

Neshat's genius for creating milieus rich in imagery and mood is fully evident in *OverRuled*. The environment here is suffocating in its maleness, a fact that is no coincidence for Neshat, whose works have evoked again and again a world of women. The space of theocratic law and the brutality of justice via dismemberment is a masculine one and only two women appear as defendants. The focus on mirror symmetry, something that is often present in Neshat's work, is found here also: Nine military men on each side, two defendants on each side, with the musicians offering bursts of red in a generally monochrome color scheme. Movements are composed along these lines - two men, for example, whispering on each side of the judge's ears. The art direction, by [Shahram Karami](#), exemplifies the rigidity of structure through this excessive symmetry, and there is a sense of being trapped in a claustrophobic, obsessively orderly world.

It is hard to say what *OverRuled* really is; perhaps it is a short play, or a long installation, or both. It is sometimes a musical performance, sometimes a debate, sometimes a poetry reading. Occasionally it reveals a strong narrative arc, but then this is taken away, lest the audience become too comfortably anchored. The very fact that it evades characterization is perhaps its strongest quality. There is simply no other way to approach anything about or from Iran, a place maligned through misrepresentations, and about which no singular truth permeates. *OverRuled* offers a mere point of entry, albeit a powerful one. It is alienating, illuminating, simple and complex all at once, but one thing is certain: it is meant to leave you with a lot more questions than answers.

Bhakti Shringarpure is the editor of Warscapes.