



Lina Khoury's Hakeh Niswan

Lebanese director and playwright Lina Khoury caused a bit of a stir when she broke taboos not only in Lebanon, but the entire Arab world, with her play *Hakeh Niswan*. Seeing Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* in America three times inspired Lina to write an Arabic version that tackled female sexual issues dealing with their own relationships to their bodies, particularly the vagina. The play represents another example of Lebanese artists working to address their society's taboos, and while the play is at any given time funny, moving and emotional, the monologues ultimately detail a variety of serious themes, including sexual frustration, homosexuality, violence, rape, and pre-menstrual syndrome.

What is Hakeh Niswan about exactly?

Hakeh Niswan is made up of many monologues. Three are adapted from Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*. The others are based on interviews with Lebanese women, ranging from 18 to 55, about their perceptions of the relationship between their lives and their womanhood.

The monologues highlight the complexity of attitudes towards the female sex. It was fascinating for me to see how women in Lebanon feel about their sexuality and other matters they encounter in their daily lives, like violence and rape.

I decided to mix the sexual problems with broader social issues, though they can be related to sexuality – battered women, psychological and emotional abuse, the trouble women face taking public transport or walking down the street.

What inspired you to do this play?

[After seeing *The Vagina Monologues*] It was liberating to know that other people have been through the same experiences many of us have. I thought it would be great subject matter for a play in Lebanon.

So it this primarily what brought you back to Lebanon?

Yes. This is my first Beirut production. I'd already done ten various productions in the US, but I felt a longing to come back home and do something for myself as well as others. I dropped everything there and returned. This project is really special since I did the writing as well as the directing.

Was it hard to be so open on stage?

It was hard finding the right people, especially for a script that is so daring. We couldn't use real word for female private parts, so I called it coco. Nevertheless, you can imagine the difficulties in finding people to act out the scenes. I spoke to many people who were excited to participate at first, but then declined saying that their parents wouldn't allow them, or that they were worried about what people would say, which I can understand. But I kept going until I found the right team. They are really great – each has her own style on stage. Being open on stage was never a problem to any of them. I didn't want to create something to shock people, but I wanted them to relate to it. Although the subject focuses on sensitive matters, it is less about sex and more about the problems we all face.

Did you face any problems with censorship?

Let's just say problem is an understatement of what we went through. It took us a year-and-a-half to get the censorship team to approve the script. I had to change so much until they finally accepted it. I think they gave me the go ahead simply because they got bored of seeing me.

When did the play first start?

We began performing last year at the Masrah al-Madina on April 21st. The original plan was to do it for one week. Bu people kept coming and the theatre was full so we extended a while, but we then had to move to another venue, the Monroe Hotel, where we are now. We close at the end of September.

How did you feel when you saw people walk out?

Honestly, I expected worse to happen. Today, no one walks out because people who come to see it know what they are going to see. It was overwhelming and exciting. But I knew that I could not avoid the fact that some people would not like what they saw.

What do you think people appreciate in your play?

Honesty. Women learned that other women have similar problems. And men understood that women are not just hysterical, but have real and urgent issues.

How did you handle criticism?

Well, no one really criticised. But when I started adapting *The Monologues* two years ago, I would read the script to my friends and they would laugh, saying, "Have you forgotten that you're in Lebanon and not the US?" But it didn't stop me. I wanted to try.

How about your parents? How did they react?

My parents are the best. They have supported me all the way. Theatre is a kind of art. No matter who says what, it's normal for people to have different reactions.

What are your future plans for the play?

I was invited to take it to Morocco, as well as Australia and Canada, which is going to happen over the year. I was hoping to take the play to the rest of the Arab world, but unfortunately, although many have shown interested, censorship boards are not allowing it.

Would you consider making a movie?

I was offered several projects involving scriptwriting for movies. I might consider doing it. But I love the theatre. I love the live connection with the audience and, more so, the honesty that prevails on stage since there is neither editing nor anything else to hinder the spontaneity that takes place on it.

What else do you do?

I am a partner in a film production company called Four Productions and I teach at the American University College of Science and Technology (AUST) in Beirut. But I always find time to research and work on other projects.

What is your next plan? Will it be as daring?

Yes, I like daring. I think digging underneath the surface to unearth our societal realities is important. My next project will be about relationships between men and women. There is so much happening and no one dares talk about the truth. I'm still in the research phase, however.