

## Telling Tale of Afghan Wars by Any Means Necessary



Photograph by Richard Termine for The New York Times

Mahmoud Shah Salimi (flying), the director of the Exile Theater of Afghan, in "Beyond the Mirror," a collaboration with Bond Street Theater.

By MARGO JEFFERSON

What do we want from political theater, the kind that lays bare the social realities we are shielded - or shield ourselves - from?

For starters, we want these sometimes awful, alien realities to have force, to be as tangible to us as our everyday lives. And by force I don't mean brute power: blood and screams of anguish, brandished rifles and carefully simulated rapes; I mean power that continues after the play is over. Not just images that haunt us, but also sounds and words that prompt us to think more, learn more and take action.

How to make vital political theater is hardly a new question. Playwrights, directors and performers everywhere have used satire, fable, melodrama, propaganda, puppet theater, epic theater, carnivals and performance art. Still, seeing "Beyond the Mirror," at Theater for the New City through Dec. 4, reminds us how urgent a question it is.

**The first collaboration between an Afghan and an American theater company, it has a quiet authority, even delicacy, that is truly powerful.**

The project began in Pakistan's refugee camps shortly after 9/11, when members of Bond Street Theater met a group of Afghan actors who called themselves the Exile Theater. The next year, the Bond Street company, led by its director, Joanna Sherman, went to Kabul. There, along with two million other returning Afghans, the Exile troupe started over.

The entire country had been devastated by war. The Soviets invaded in 1979; then came the Mujahadeen resistance and factional wars, leading to the rise of the Taliban, which banned all the arts, including theater; in 2001 came the United States invasion. That same year, the theatrical collaboration began. First, Exile's director, Mahmoud Shah Salimi, created a nonverbal scenario about the quarter-century of war. Then came rehearsals that melded various traditions: what Ms. Sherman called, in American Theater magazine, "an exciting mix of music, dance, martial arts, mime, acrobatics, any way we can communicate our tale without words." And in a radical move, a woman joined the all-male Exile troupe; women's experiences became a central part of this war story.

The result is theater with restrained mime and abstracted imagery. Two puppet heads twist on sticks. We don't see a literal hanging; we have to imagine it. As in a nightmare, the details become very exact and intimate. Props are nonliteral, too. Sticks with ropes attached serve as rifles (and every other kind of brute-force weapon). A small blue puppet becomes a child gurgling happily as it crawls towards a land mine. Short scenes show normal life being interrupted or destroyed, or remade so that brutality becomes ordinary. After all, killing a man for a sack you believe contains food can be normal behavior if you are starving.

"Beyond the Mirror" has eight actors (four American, four Afghani) and one musician. And the theater is small, so you do not have the luxury of physical distance.

A robed man sits onstage, playing long melodies on the ruhab, an elegant, short-necked lute with roots in the eighth century. The most literal images appear and disappear on a screen. Here are tanks and machine guns. Here is the lavish greenery of the countryside and austere snow-capped mountains; a white-gold sun, in a beige sky; a camel with a load of hay on its back that looks like a cloud. People too, in cars and on bicycles, or cooking in markets and crouching in muddy streets.

In a 1972 essay called "Photographs of Agony," the critic and novelist John Berger wrote that images of literal and explicit horror exist apart from our lives. They create a discontinuity that we may feel as moral inadequacy, and that sense of inadequacy, he says, numbs us.

We're all too familiar with it.

This applies to theater too. "Beyond the Mirror" takes us beyond the obviously horrific. That is when we start to mistrust the apparent safety and privilege of our own lives.