

How and why I wrote *On the Couch with Nora Armani?*

Six easy steps *to follow or not*

1. Coincidence:

The writing of *On the Couch with Nora Armani* came about by pure coincidence. Or is there such a thing?

Through a mutual acquaintance I met a producer in London who during a casual conversation mentioned that he was looking for a one person show. Did I have something? Could I do a one woman show?

The idea had not been unfamiliar to me. I had already thought about creating one on several occasions. In fact, I even had come close to it when working in collaboration with other artists on two-person shows. One of these was *Sojourn at Ararat* (1986-1998) I co-created with Gerald Papsian based on a compilation of Armenian poetry through the ages. This was followed with *Nannto, Nannto* (1999-2001) created in collaboration with Japanese cellist Aya Sakakibara combining world poetry in original languages using music as a language. Poetry and prose, not necessarily written for dramatic use, often present rich and innovative resources for actors.

Armed with this knowledge and experience and thinking I could easily concoct something similar, my immediate response to the London-based producer was a confident affirmation.

2. Starting to write:

When that same evening I was looking for possible sources, a thought crossed my mind. Why was I hiding behind other people's words? What if I told my own story in my own words?

Life coincidences have always fascinated me. What is destiny? Is there such a thing? If we cannot change our provenance, we can at least find out the circumstances under which it was imposed on us in order to hopefully better understand what is yet to come, I reasoned. For this, my family seemed a good starting point. I needed to understand its dreams, its aspirations, its disappointments and finally its love. Choosing Nasser's Egypt and the Middle East as a backdrop, together with the fascinating stories that had colored my childhood, I had enough raw material. This was also an ideal occasion, in retrospect, to do homage to my family members by reviving their memory and reliving their company albeit for the short duration of a play. I started by writing about what I knew

best; what I had lived through, suffered from, laughed at, cried for and thought about for a long time.

But in a world dominated by fame and celebrity it was natural for me to think that no one would be interested in my story. Fortunately, the first public reading of the play's first draft proved otherwise. Soon I realized that the best stories were the ones told from the heart, based on our personal and preferably most intimate experiences and emotions. The trick was in knowing how to respect some important rules such as being concise, having a clear story-line, staying within the subject matter and using some theatrical surprises.

3. A little help from my friends:

Help came from a documentary film maker friend Andrew Weeks who acted as a sounding board during the initial stages of the writing process. His feedback was instrumental in helping me understand why some parts were more interesting than others, where I was being repetitive and which segments I could do without.

The most difficult task for an author is to make cuts. While novels offer more space for chatter, description and imagery, plays and scripts have very precise parameters. In little time, I learnt to make my own cuts. Pages and pages were thrown into the trash cans of oblivion.

4. Confronting an audience:

The real acid test came with the first public reading in London for an invited audience. That version of the play was one hour and forty minutes long with one interval. The audience comprised of close to forty-five friends, acquaintances, professionals and others had nothing but positive and encouraging remarks. I had already cut ten minutes for the second reading staged for another similar group a few days later. The interval was eventually eliminated in favor of a very brief exit and re-entrance strategically placed to give the audience, and the actor, time to catch their breath and assimilate what had transpired to that point.

5. Other versions:

The existence of other versions helped the play's development. Director François Kergourlay had his input as a 'script doctor' bringing in certain ameliorations to the French version. This in turn had repercussions on the further crystallization of the English version. Currently the play exists in an Italian translation by Silvana Cinus, soon to be presented to Italian-speaking audiences, while the project of translating it into Arabic still remains in its early stages of development.

6. Crystallization:

I have considered publishing the play several times but the occasion did not avail itself and I did not pursue it further. Plays, I believe, should be published only after being

performed extensively in public, allowing them to mature and develop. Almost five years since its first public reading and many performances worldwide, it seemed to be ready.

At times I am still tempted to make changes but then I immediately remind myself that the process has to stop at some point.

However, as it is a visual medium, a DVD was created, and that is the version that is 'published' and available to the audience. It is directed by Niki Battacharya, and was shoot a sound stage in Brooklyn, with three cameras, and a slightly transposed script to accommodate the new medium.

These DVD's are now available for sale.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

When I first wrote this play I never thought it would grow so and in the process help me develop as an actor and author. Moreover, I never imagined it would be published in such a valuable collection alongside such talented women playwrights.

Over the initial five years of performing and reading it in public, men and women of different backgrounds, nationalities and experiences: Bosniac, Martiniquais, Egyptian, Armenian, French, American, Turkish, Japanese, British and other, have found recognizable features in it. Some have even said it closely resembles their *own* stories. I thank them for sharing these encouraging comments with me. It is very rewarding for a playwright to be appreciated by such a diverse array of spectators. The ultimate appreciation, however, comes with seeing one's work published.

I wish to take this opportunity and thank my family members for keeping the memory alive and passing on their talent of telling stories on to me.

My words of gratitude go to Andrew Weeks for his constructive feedback, to Gerald Papasian for taking the time to patiently listen to various versions and changes, to François Kergourlay for his noteworthy input as a director, to Carsten Holbraad for suggesting the title, to Peter Barker for reading and correcting several versions of the script and to Daniel-Jean Colorado and Judith d'Aleazzo for reading and commenting on the earlier drafts of the French version. Last but not least, thanks to Patricia Perry for helping bring the play to its first audiences in the early stages of development.

I would also like to thank all the individuals and colleagues who have to date worked on the production of the play and in the numerous venues in one capacity or another from its first readings until its most recent performances. They have each inadvertently or intentionally had an impact on the development of the final draft.

DEDICATION:

I would like to dedicate my play to the sweet and everlasting memory of my paternal uncle Jack Exerjian and his daughter, my dear cousin actress Vanya Exerjian who were tragically murdered in Cairo on March 16, 2004. With their disappearance the joy of sharing intimate family portraits with two dear members of my kin who would most appreciate it and identify with it, also disappears forever.

THE PLAY

ON THE COUCH WITH NORA ARMANI

PRODUCTION NOTES

(to be added at the end of the play if necessary. Otherwise can do without it):

Initially the play was conceived with a minimum of props all fitting into a suitcase designating the idea of travel and peregrinations. This choice was at once a symbolic statement on the idea of being rootless and a pure practicality for easy transport.

Director François Kergourlay further simplified the use of props in order to retain a clear form of narrative keeping the concentration focused on the actor instead of diluting it with the props and their symbolic meanings. This made transport conditions even simpler. Most of the furniture and the area rug can be found in host theatres whereas the costume can be easily carried in a suitcase.

The light and sound cues are kept down to a minimum and can easily be replicated in any professional theatre. Five sound cues punctuate five important moments in the play. Two of these are dance numbers and three highlight evocative moments.

Further details pertaining to the production should be discussed with the author and changes, if needed, should only be made with her consent.
