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Introduction to "A Case Study of Directorial Courage: An Iranian Director's Subversive Production of Lorca's The House of Bernarda Alba" by Joie Miroux and Peter Zazzali

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In the peer-reviewed section of *SDC Journal* we pursue SDC's mission to further knowledge of the crafts of directing and choreography in the United States and globally.

In this issue our authors offer unique insights into the practices of a courageous, experimental director in Iran. Despite the strict censorship of the Iranian government, Ali Akbar Alizad aimed to direct a production with explicit social-political themes, borrowing inspiration from a variety of Western directors and layering their techniques to create his own subversive approach to Lorca's provocative play, *The House of Bernarda Alba*. As the following description and the evocative production photos testify, Alizad's production powerfully critiqued political tyranny, oppression of women, and censorship in Iran through complex, covert cultural exchange with Western directing practices.

INTRODUCED + EDITED BY ANNE FLIOTSOS + ANN M. SHANAHAN

The House of Bernarda Alba at Entezami Theatre, Tehran, Iran, 2014 PHOTO Hanieh Zahed

A CASE STUDY OF DIRECTORIAL COURAGE: AN IRANIAN DIRECTOR'S SUBVERSIVE PRODUCTION OF LORCA'S *The House of Bernarda Alba*

BY JOIE MIROUX + PETER ZAZZALI

Bernarda Alba: "In the eight years this mourning that will last, the wind from the street shan't enter this house." (Lorca 21)

Written two months before his brutal death at the hands of Spain's Francoist regime in 1936, Federico Garcia Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* simultaneously addresses themes of authoritarianism and the oppression of women. Set on the rural estate of the titular character, the play centers on Alba's tyrannical treatment of her five daughters, with the youngest (Adela) responding to the repressive situation by committing suicide. *Bernarda's* "house" is a site in which individualism and freedom are rejected in the context of a patriarchal society in which a woman's self-worth is attached to her husband. Having lost her second husband, Alba orders an eight-year period of mourning over the household, a decree that disallows her daughters the right to freely express themselves or make personal decisions. Denied their individuality, the young women are casualties of her hard-hearted dictums and unwavering commitment to tradition. It is a domestic sphere rife with subjugation and death.

A reaction against the totalitarianism of Francoist Spain, Lorca's play and its sociopolitical themes continue to resonate today, as noted by Spanish theatre scholar Gwynne Edwards, who posits *Bernarda Alba* "as the expression of a fundamental and universal conflict between those life enhancing and life denying that have been at the heart of human experience from time immemorial" (Lorca xxix). Thus, the play can be seen as a call for sociopolitical change in the face of dictatorial rule, a theme germane to Iranian director Ali Akbar Alizad's decision to stage the work in February of 2014. Alizad explains:

The eight years of mourning in *The House of Bernarda Alba* reminded me of all the fear and misery cultivated by the eight years of [Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad's presidency. I wanted to showcase the damage that he had caused, specifically those related to women's rights and their oppression and exclusion from the sociopolitical discourse of our country.¹

Just as Ahmadinejad's regime terrorized Iranians from 2005 to 2013, Alba likewise lords over her daughters for a period of eight years. This contextual similarity between the play and the Iranian dictator prompted Alizad's courageous endeavor.

Our aim in this essay is to shed light on the creative and personal courage of one of Iraq's most provocative stage directors by presenting his working processes in the context of a subversive rendering of the play that tacitly criticized the Ahmadinejad regime. We begin by providing a contemporaneous overview of Iran's sociopolitical situation, before examining Alizad's approach to staging *Bernarda Alba* in a production that was as daring in its theatrical form as it was in its controversial content. In doing so, we address his multifaceted approach to rehearsals, which included techniques from Bogart, Brecht, Stanislavsky, Meisner, and Wilson.²