

'The Solitary' from Syria about human drama

Jonathan Curiel, Special to The Chronicle

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In the summer of 2006, two men from Syria traveled to Midland, Texas. In Syria, this was big news. The men, Nawar Bulbul and Ramez Alaswad, were acclaimed actors who were going to perform an Arabic-language play in President George W. Bush's hometown, at a time when news of Syria was dominated by headlines about war, bloodshed and terrorism. Would the Texas audience be skeptical or even hostile to Bulbul and Alaswad?

In the end, the play about a cobbler and a shoe polisher received four awards, standing ovations and the praise of a theatergoer who, Alaswad says, told the actors, "We knew a lot of things about Syria through the media, but let me say something: You can't be terrorists when you're doing a play like this."

"We can't forget this sentence," Alaswad says in a phone interview from Damascus, Syria's capital. "We can't forget."

Friday through Sunday, Alaswad and Bulbul are back in the United States, this time for the U.S. premiere of their latest two-man work, "The Solitary," about a prisoner and his prison guard. The production - part of the San Francisco International Arts Festival - is in Arabic (with English subtitles) and features prominent Arab-named characters. (The prisoner, whom Bulbul portrays, is called Abu Nidal, which translates as "Father of the Struggle.") But Bulbul and Alaswad say "The Solitary" is about universal truths - not about Syria, not about an Arab prison system, not about the Arab world.

Proof of the play's general appeal came last year at a theater festival in Prague, where organizers said its backdrop of politics, prison and personal drama was an eerie mirror into Czech history of the late '60s and early '70s, when the Communists crushed dissent there. So taken by "The Solitary" were the Prague theater organizers that they asked permission to restage it with Czech actors.

"We were happy," says Alaswad, "to see a version in the Czech language."

Parallel dilemmas

In "The Solitary," the prisoner and prison guard bond over parallel dilemmas. Abu Nidal is a member of a big political movement that he felt obligated to join because of his wife, who treats him (through letters she sends) with disdain. The guard, Mhanna, also has a wife, whose pregnancy puts pressure on him to obtain a higher degree.

Already a father, Abu Nidal shares his parental knowledge with Mhanna in their solitary jail space, but

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their quarters also become a scene of horror when Mhanna is ordered to torture Nidal. The play covers a seven-month period, giving audiences a chance to see the characters change for better and for worse, and how both men confront choices that were made for them.

According to Bulbul. Abu Nidal's character says at one point: "I want to be a hero in my wife's eyes - I'm a simple man who wants to raise my kids. It's not my war!"

Theater critics in Syria have raved about "The Solitary," saying it "deserves to be seen" and calling it "stunning" and "beautiful." Syria's government, though, is not in the habit of lauding theater pieces about Arab men in prison. Like his father, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has been criticized by human-rights groups for overseeing arrests of political prisoners. Apparently, though, the al-Assad government approves of "The Solitary," and Alaswad said Syria's Los Angeles consular officials might attend this weekend's performances at Fort Mason.

Bulbul and Alaswad are nervous about bringing "The Solitary" to San Francisco only because of the city's reputation for having sophisticated audiences. Serge Bakalian, managing director of San Francisco-based Golden Thread Productions, which is co-presenting "The Solitary," said the play should appeal to Bay Area theatergoers for the same reasons it appeals to audiences in Damascus and Prague: Riveting acting that invites the audience to interpret the play's underlying themes. Theatergoers will debate whether "The Solitary" carries echoes of the abuses at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison or the United States' Guantanamo Bay facility or Syria's own incarceration complexes.

Questions, answers

"Theater that's more effective," says Bakalian, "is theater that lets the audience ask questions like, 'Why are the two men in the situation they're in,' and lets the audience find the answers themselves."

Beyond Syria, the Czech Republic and Texas, Bulbul and Alaswad have performed throughout the greater Middle East and in Japan, Spain and Canada. When they aren't running their Al-Khareef Theatre Troupe in Damascus, Bulbul, 37, and Alaswad, 34, appear on Syrian TV dramas and comedies. Because their television programs are beamed on satellite networks, Bulbul and Alaswad are known throughout the Arab world. "The Solitary" is bringing Bulbul and Alaswad to the attention of new audiences in the West - and prompting them to believe in "fate."

"We both graduated from acting school in 1998," says Alaswad. "You take the first step, you see yourself evolve, and after some years, you find yourself deep in it."

"Maybe," adds Alaswad, who co-wrote "The Solitary" with Bulbul, and who directs the production, "Syria can't compete with Europe and North America in the industrial field or the agricultural field, but we are so happy we can compete in doing art."

The Solitary: Two-man play by Nawar Bulbul and Ramez Alaswad. 9 p.m. Fri., 7 p.m. Sat., 4 and 6:30 p.m. Sun. Southside Theatre, Fort Mason, S.F. \$16-\$20.

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