

# *Aqbal Al-Khayr:*

## The First Women Only Play in Saudi Arabia

**Noura Al-Sakkaf**

The Janadriyya festival is a cultural event hosted by the Saudi National Guard and held annually at a location 45 minutes outside the capital of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh. The location is a housing complex especially created for the festival and consists of replicas of traditional houses and buildings from the different regions of the kingdom as well as a large hangar-like structure for theatrical performances. Each year artisans from all over the Kingdom are invited to attend and demonstrate the various wares that are created in their specific regions. An operetta is also performed for the male visitors. There are art exhibits, debates, poetry readings, and other activities housed at another location. In July of 1998, the chairperson of the women's activities at the Janadriyya festival contacted me. The year 1998 was a special year; it was the 100th anniversary of the taking of Riyadh by His Majesty King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud. This historic event led to the ultimate unification of Saudi Arabia.

In July 1998 I knew very little about the festival but I was intrigued enough to accept a meeting with the head of the committee, HRH Princess Abeer bint Turki Bin Nasser. I left the meeting having said yes without a moment of hesitation. I had just been asked to direct a play for the festival; not only a play but a play by women, with women, for women. This was an opportunity beyond my wildest dreams. Of course, I would have preferred

to direct a play with a mixed cast but in a country where gender segregation is the norm and where theater is practically non-existent, this was a rare opportunity.

The working team's collective knowledge of the current cultural scene in Saudi Arabia was at best non-existent, so Princess Abeer's contribution proved invaluable. We met the renowned female Saudi author Badriyya al-Bishr who had been selected to write the script.

Princess Abeer had also selected a design company from Los Angeles; initially I felt this was a mistake: we were a million miles from L.A. and many more cultural light years away. A local or Arab designer would have been the apt choice. However, our meeting with Jeremy Railton went so well that our fears were allayed and we knew that he and his design team would do a great job. Fortunately, a friend and colleague from college, Aliyya al-Khalidi, was living in Riyadh at the time and she agreed to be the assistant director.

The immediate concern was talent: where do we get it? The suggestion from princess Abeer and her assistant Faten Delejan was to recruit young girls from the National Guard schools. Off we went and within ten minutes of being in one of the schools we were aware that it would be impossible to work

with the girls. The overwhelming majority of the girls came from extremely conservative families and the thought of them performing song and dance even to an all female audience was unacceptable to their parents and to many of the girls themselves. We were pressed for time so instead of trying to convince the girls and their families that no harm will come from participating in such a cultural activity, we turned to the privately owned schools where participating in a theatrical activity was not frowned upon.

Given that we still had no script, it was difficult to hold try-outs. The committee for the festival whose job was to read and approve of all written material did not retain an initial script from Badriyya al-Bishr. During summer, I had read several history books about Saudi Arabia and eventually, through discussions with Badriyya and the rest of the team, we decided to do a play about prominent Saudi women who had been instrumental in helping the cause of unifying Saudi Arabia. We knew we would be working with inexperienced teenage girls, so we opted for spoken Arabic.

The plot was very simple: five girls in a school yard are always nagging about how terrible their lives are, when suddenly a rather ethereal woman appears and berates them for their attitude. She then takes them on a journey where each of the five girls witnesses the deeds of her grandmother. This simple plot line ran in parallel with the period from the taking of Riyadh in 1902 to the total unification of the country in 1932. The choice to do a play about women was obvious: it would have been unthinkable to do a play with girls disguised as men and it was crucial to highlight the role women played in the birth of the country. With the script now taking shape, we began casting. Many of the girls who ended up participating came from the private schools and also belonged to the royal family. Several were older and were at university level.

The logistical nightmare began in earnest. We were rehearsing in a private palace, where there was plenty of room. The main issue was marshalling the large number of participants, 117 girls to be precise. We had selected the main roles and

supporting roles but the majority of the girls were there to participate in the song and dance numbers and the crowd scenes. From the start we decided to divide the girls into two groups: we had five major scenes and the finale, so the groups would alternate the scenes so that they will have time to change their costumes. We further divided the girls into singers and/or dancers, small speaking parts and crowd. The groups were color-coded and we proceeded with the pre-staging phase. Aliyya al-Khalidi worked on diction and movement. The choreographer worked on dance steps, the composer Hossam Ramzi worked on voice, and I worked with the main characters on their lines, character development, and movement.

Other elements had to be worked on in parallel: costume design, make-up design, and the recording of the music. It would have been ideal to have a live orchestra but a women-only orchestra does not exist in Saudi Arabia. So Hossam went off to Cairo to record the music. Given that we had to work in a very large space with a 50-meter long stage and a large cast, the visual elements had to be simple but powerful and changes had to be minimal. Jeremy Railton and his team created a series of soft canopies that would be raised and lowered according to the scene. We had made a selection of images to be used in a large format power projection, PIGI system. It was the end of December and the start of the month of Ramadan, so rehearsals started after the evening prayers and continued past midnight. We had moved into a parking garage that was the only space large enough to accommodate us.

The disruption in the rehearsal process because of breaking the fast was not helpful. The girls lacked discipline and commitment and it was a struggle to maintain a calm attitude among them. Some failed to respect the rehearsal time by arriving late or failing to attend.

The designers and their crews were starting to arrive, costumes were ready, music was ready, and we were getting very close to the performance date. My weight was dropping fast; tempers were flaring and arguments erupting with regard to the dance

numbers and other aspects of the play. There were very few qualified stage managers in Saudi Arabia so we started recruiting people from Lebanon. We went out looking for props and we needed to find a horse. To keep the gender thing going we opted for a mare. The list of what needed to be done just grew longer and longer but there was a sense that everything was beginning to gel. Then the *Eid al-Fitr* (i.e. end of Ramadan celebration) came along and everything came to a halt; nothing for a whole week.

We returned to work knowing that this was the final stretch. A few more days of rehearsal in the garage and then we moved to the performance space. It all happened very quickly.

Then the news dropped like a bomb: some ultra orthodox religious figures wanted the play cancelled. They had written to His Majesty the King to complain, claiming that this performance was an abomination. We fretted for a good 24 hours while the work still went ahead until the news was announced that the performance could go ahead. Earlier in the rehearsal process we had added another twenty girls as a chorus as well as a Saudi woman singer and her troupe of percussionists. This sat very poorly with the religious authorities who agreed to allow us to perform only if the singer and her chorus were removed from the play and the number of performances was reduced from

three to two. We agreed reluctantly, knowing that many highly placed individuals had worked very hard to make sure our performance went ahead. This encounter with the extremists brought the importance of what we were doing to the fore. We were breaking quite a few taboos, and with increasing coverage in the press the weight of what all this meant gave us the extra impetus to carry on with ever more determination. The underlying purpose of this whole exercise became more and more precise in all our minds and we knew we had to succeed in pulling off the minor miracle of staging *Aqbal al-Khayr*, the first ever women-only play in Saudi Arabia.

The performance space could hold up to 8000 people. We had a full house. The performance started two hours late due to strict security procedures and traffic. I hid backstage. The performance started and then there was applause. That is all I remember. Afterwards the girls came to me with hugs and tears. One of them thanked me and when I asked why, she said: "I feel that as an individual and a woman that I have some value, that I can do something with my life, be someone". In a country where women are still treated as second-class citizens, this was deeply important, regardless of the quality of the work itself.

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