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Waanzee! When Religion Becomes Merciless

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Waanzee! When Religion Becomes Merciless

Waanzee is a story situated in a Dutch Calvinistic community during the First World War. Why did you bring in actors from Morocco?

The inspiration was *The Battle for God* by Karen Armstrong. It concerns fundamentalism in the monotheistic religions. When I read the book by Haasnoot, I thought: "This is the story that I want to tell about fundamentalism in general!" An aspect that all these religions share is that charismatic individuals can appear on the scene in times of hardship or rapid change; this may end in upheaval, chaos, or even madness. This process is given a human face in the play *Waanzee!*

It could have been performed by Dutch actors, but then the play might have been strongly associated with renowned Dutch playwright Heijermans (1864-1924) who wrote fishermen dramas. With Moroccan actors the play becomes something for today.

Falkenier is a charismatic figure who tries to convince his crew of his apocalyptic vision. This theme reminds me of the tumult surrounding 11/9 and Bin Laden.

Bin Laden is timeless. A while ago I saw a documentary about Afghanistan when the Taliban were still in power. The superintendent of a football stadium that had been sponsored by Europe talked about the executions that were carried out there: "It is such a pleasure to see the sinners punished! Let the Europeans sponsor our executions!" The Calvinist Falkenier is just like that. His religion has become de-humanized. The essence of religion is mercy. With this play I want to show what happens when people become merciless. It always ends in tragedy.

What type of public do you want to reach?

I am trying to reach both an Arabic-speaking and Dutch-speaking public. I try to select topics that are interesting for both audiences. This play has mainly attracted a Dutch-speaking public, maybe because *Waanzee* is considered a 'serious' play in Moroccan circles. They prefer something light. They want to laugh. But there is humor in the play. The two youngest—originally male—crew members are played by two actresses who provide comic relief. They side with Falkenier and do this quite innocently until they become victims themselves.

Waanzee! is not the first play in which you engage Moroccan actors. Earlier such productions included Henrik Ibsen's play Nora. You also attempted to stage the opera Aisha two years ago when it was suddenly cancelled, seemingly following protests against portraying the Prophet and those close to him.

Putting the Prophet on stage is something we never tried. Muhammad always said that believers must not worship him, but Allah. If we forget that he was just a man, we are de-humanizing religion. My aim was to tell this story through the opera *Aisha*. According to Nasr Abu Zaid it would have been possible to put on *Aisha* in the 1950s in the Arab world because at that time people were convinced that it would contribute to modernity.

I did not hide the fact that Abu Bakr, Fatima and Aisha would be on stage. This did not cause us any difficulties when recruiting musicians,

The play *Waanzee (Mad See)* recently toured through the Netherlands. Based on the novel *Waanzee* by Robert Haasnoot, the play is a reconstruction of events in a small Dutch Protestant fishing community in 1915 and centers around the character of Arend Falkenier, a deeply religious man. Out at open sea he seeks to convince the captain and the crew that he received a divine message revealing that the end of time had come and that they were the only survivors and should head for the Eternal City of Jerusalem. To prove this prophecy he breaks his compass and cuts off the sails, claiming that God alone can lead them through him. He has three reluctant fishermen killed. A Norwegian freighter eventually finds the vessel and returns the surviving crew to safety. The stage version of *Waanzee* was performed in Arabic with actors from Morocco with supertitles in Dutch.

Below is an interview with the play's director, Gerrit Timmers.

apart from the singer who was to play the role of Abu Bakr who I decided not to put on stage. The female singers did not object to being on stage.

Assia Djebar wrote the libretto. Both she and Abu Zaid are controversial in the Islamic world. Did you consult only these two people?

We did consult others. Moreover, the actors had already seen the script in French. It was only when the Arabic translation arrived that some began to consider seriously what the play was about. A week before rehearsals started Saida Baadi, one of the actresses, expressed that she had grave doubts about the play and suggested performing from off-stage. But that was impossible; Aisha belongs on the stage, her story must be told and sung. At about that time an article appeared in the Moroccan press suggesting that the play was a blasphemy.

MARIA SOAAD BOUANANI

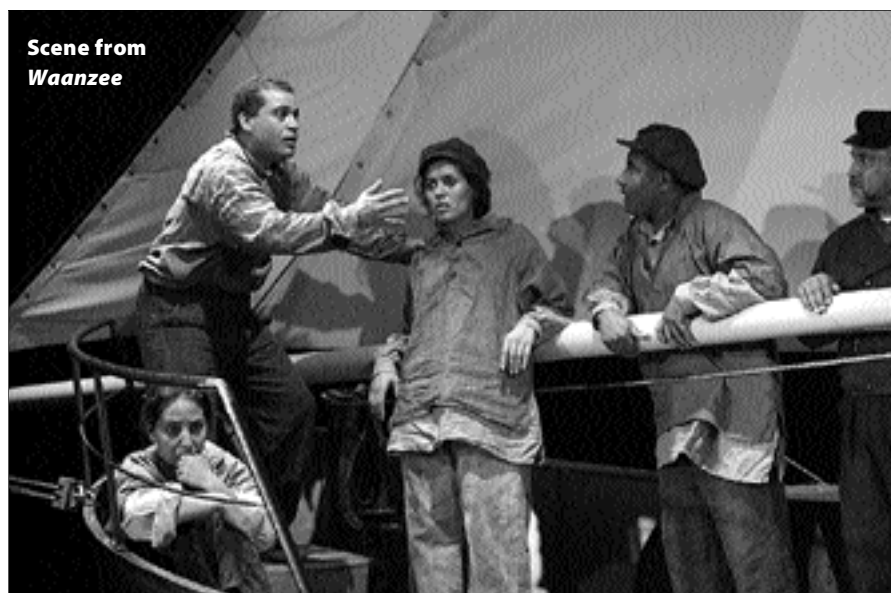
Saida Baadi told the Dutch journalists who contacted her about that article that Salman Rushdie's fate would be ours. Meanwhile, the Dutch press reported that the play was being cancelled because of threats. I stated over and over again that we had not received a single threat. But, of course, journalists only want to hear that there is an Islamic danger in the Netherlands. Questions were even asked in Parliament! In actual fact, the Moroccan newspaper article had stated that if the production were to be continued a rumour would spread like that surrounding Salman Rushdie. That is very different from getting actual death threats.

Why was the opera performed in Italy but not in the Netherlands?

In Italy the play was staged by non-Muslim actors in Italian. I wanted to attract a more mixed public. It is important to address a mixed audience, in particular after 11/9. Perhaps, the increasing number of actors in the Netherlands of Moroccan background have a role to play in realizing this endeavor.

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Scene from *Waanzee*

PHOTO: LEO VAN VELZEN, 2003