

Crossing Cultures

by Amy Krivohlavek

Bootleg Islam reviewed September 8, 2005

Ever laughed at an eggplant?

Prepare to start. Back from a sold-out engagement at last year's Fringe Festival, Negin Farsad presents her smart comic riff on Islamic culture in her one-woman show *Bootleg Islam* at the Tank. There are only two performances remaining, so make a date to get there and see this boldly engaging show. And trust me, she can and *will* make you laugh at that eggplant.



Farsad has been compared to Janeane Garofalo for the sharpness of her humor, and while she is similarly blunt and incendiary, Farsad creates a style all her own. Part standup comedy, part "How I Spent My Summer Vacation" presentation (complete with PowerPoint projections), *Bootleg Islam* is Farsad's triumphant account of her experience straddling a cultural divide.

Farsad was raised in Palm Springs, Calif., and her experience with Iranian relatives first consisted of only brief, sporadic visits to Iran, in which she smuggled illegal American pop CDs to her cousins. In 1999, however, as a 23-year-old, more-experienced American woman, Farsad visited Iran for one month for her cousin Mahsa's wedding. It is this visit that she recounts here, complete with vibrant characters and events as well as Farsad's expanding consciousness of cultural dissonance and its ramifications.

Bootleg Islam is at its most poignant, and laugh-out-loud funny, in the parallels Farsad draws between her life and Mahsa's. They are the same age, but have been raised in completely different cultures. Farsad compares their life paths in "30-second well-crafted montages," complete with a "V-Loss Chart" (the "V" is for virginity) for each woman. Within these montages, Farsad notes the cultural differences in such areas as mobility (Farsad has lived in three countries, while Mahsa has moved around the same small part of town all her life) and sexual proclivity (Farsad engages in a vibrant sex life, while Mahsa must save herself until marriage).

As much as Farsad works to criticize Iranian culture, she is self-critical and a bit defensive as well: "If she knew the truth about me, she would consider me a total Iranian-slut-whore-hooker-prostitute. In New York, they call that a Friendster."

Farsad also adroitly juggles cultural references, embodying characters ranging from her "closeted-yet-overtly-gay-wedding-planner cousin" Amir to her Clark Gable-look-alike uncle. Particularly hilarious is an account of three old women talking at the wedding in the manner of *The Golden Girls*.

The eggplant—or *badamjan*, a staple of Persian cuisine—makes frequent appearances throughout the show, serving as a motif. Farsad first calls it "the devil," but eventually comes to love it. The eggplant stands as a symbol for Iranian culture, which Farsad initially resists and then ultimately imbibes and even craves.

My one criticism of the show is its brevity; the shift toward cultural reconciliation feels almost too forced, too sudden. All at once, Farsad seems to have made peace with living within her American cultural upbringing while respecting her family's Iranian roots. She ends her piece by citing the student riots that took place in Iran on the day she left but were never mentioned in

American newspapers. While this media oversight is clearly troubling, I would have liked to hear her explain more clearly how her reaction to the riots suddenly, "for the first time in 20 years," made her love *badamjan*.

Like *Nine Parts of Desire*, Heather Raffo's gripping one-woman interpretation of Iraqi womanhood that ran Off-Broadway last year, and *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi's book about reading forbidden American texts in secret book clubs in Iran, *Bootleg Islam* works to expand our understanding of Islamic culture, widening our cultural lens to include multitextured visions of humanity beyond the military and political faces we see on TV.

At first glance, Farsad's contribution feels light and comic, but through her comedy she also raises questions about cultural guilt and responsibility. The eggplant, so beloved by the Iranians, becomes an almost medicinal food, "an edible manifestation of the axis-of-evil crap that Iran has become, and somewhere...is a feeling of responsibility for those people because they suffer and / *don't*."

A unique, colorful, entertaining, and engrossing account of a fascinating adventure, *Bootleg Islam* is well worth seeing. Farsad's energy is contagious, and you will find yourself reconsidering your own cultural perceptions while listening to her journey. You'll also never look at an eggplant in the same way again.