

FringeNYC 2004 Reviews

Bootleg Islam

When Negin Farsad, a California-born-and-bred Iranian-American woman currently residing in the East Village, was twenty-three, she took a solo trip to the Islamic Republic of Iran to attend her cousin's wedding. *Bootleg Islam* turns the story of that journey, and of Farsad's Iranian family's life in modern-day Iran, into smart comedy. The bride, exactly the same age as Farsad, has spent almost her entire life within a three-block radius of her parents' home in Tehran; Farsad, by contrast, has lived in three countries, lost her virginity, and never before had to shop for clothing that complies with hijab, the dress code of the Islamic Republic. (The scene where she tries to shop for her trip at Macy's is one of the play's funniest.)

Assisted only by a chador, an eggplant (key ingredient of bademjan—pronounced “bottom john”—the Persian national dish, and a major character in the piece), and a slide show of “well-crafted thirty-second montages,” Farsad portrays not only herself but also those she meets on her travels. This includes many members of her family (e.g., the sheltered bride, looking very forward to becoming acquainted with sex; the “metrosexual” wedding-planner male cousin, who lends her a “fashion-forward chador” that he likes to wear on the weekends; and the Clark Gable look-alike uncle, whose womanizing tendencies have been severely affected by the Islamic regime), and also, in shorter segments, a radical mullah, a woman she encounters at a mosque, and more. Farsad is an engaging performer with a gift for character sketches, and the portraits of her family are the greatest strength of the piece.

Although *Bootleg Islam* is full of incisive observations and subtle political commentary, its primary strategy seems to be to draw parallels between American culture and Iranian—think three family matriarchs at a Persian wedding re-imagined as *The Golden Girls*, and you get the idea. This is an effective comic technique, and also serves the purpose of forcing an American audience to recognize and appreciate what they have in common with citizens of this seemingly alien nation. However, I do wish that Farsad and director Kim Gatewood had focused a little more on the structure of the piece. Each individual moment is sharply drawn, but the transitions between them feel vague, and the moments don't entirely hang together into a cohesive whole. But, Farsad clearly has a unique story to tell, and the strength as a performer to tell it.