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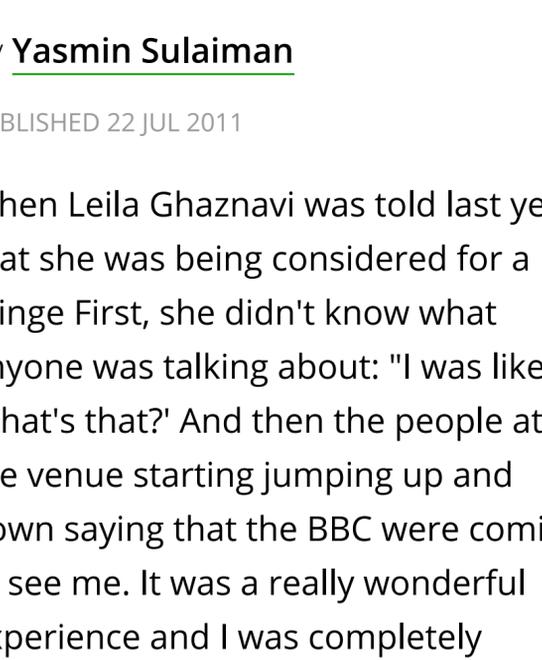
Under the veil

CalArts graduate Leila Ghaznavi chats to Yasmin Sulaiman about bringing her acclaimed Fringe debut, *Silken Veils*, back to Edinburgh and the cultural healing properties of puppetry

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By [Yasmin Sulaiman](#)

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When Leila Ghaznavi was told last year that she was being considered for a Fringe First, she didn't know what anyone was talking about: "I was like, 'what's that?' And then the people at the venue starting jumping up and down saying that the BBC were coming to see me. It was a really wonderful experience and I was completely overwhelmed."

In fact, the reception for her Fringe debut *Silken Veils*—a touching meditation on love and being an Iranian-American—was so rapturous that she's back this year for a longer run at a larger venue, and with a new play called *Broken Wing*. It's an impressive career start for Ghaznavi, an Iranian-American theatre-maker and puppeteer who has recently graduated from California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), a college with a strong history of sending student performers to the Fringe.

In *Silken Veils*, Ghaznavi—the sole performer—juggles several performance elements, including puppetry, Iranian classical music and poetry from the great Persian poet Rumi. But the focal point of the story is Darya, an Iranian-American bride who abandons her groom at the altar and locks herself in a closet, where she has flashbacks to her childhood in Iran during the revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war. For Ghaznavi, "it's really a story about how you have to face your past before you can step into your future." And while its political setting will have obvious appeal to anyone interested in Middle Eastern affairs, historic or recent, this wasn't her starting point when writing the play.

"I saw a black and white photograph of a protest from the 1979 revolution," she explains, "and in the middle of this photograph there was this one woman in the crowd. She was holding on to a man with her cheek pressed against his back and she had a full chador on. And it really got me thinking: what does it mean to try to hold on to love through political trauma? We talk about how families get torn apart in a dysfunctional environment, but what does it mean to have steady life and a strong family home when you have political turmoil all around you? That's what I really wanted to look at."

Taking on board feedback from Edinburgh reviews and audiences, she's upped *Silken Veils*' running time from 45 minutes to an hour and even added a video projection so viewers at the back can see her intricate marionettes in all their glory. Understandably, Ghaznavi—who learnt her craft at the USA's annual O'Neill National Puppetry Conference—is incredibly proud of her puppets. She made the heads of both the marionettes in the show, who portray Darya's mother and father, while the bodies were made by master puppeteers.

Puppetry is also a key element of Ghaznavi's new show *Broken Wing*, which will be performed at *Silken Veils*' former home, Venue 13, and concentrates primarily on shadow puppetry. Like its predecessor, the play also looks at Iranian-American relationships through the prism of love, and Ghaznavi strongly feels that puppetry can play a vital role in breaking down cultural barriers in the theatre.

"Unfortunately," she explains, "there is often a thought process that occurs when you see a Middle Eastern man, a prejudicial thing that can happen in an audience member's head. The beautiful thing about puppetry is that I can have them judge the characters upon their actions, not upon their skin tone. So puppetry becomes a great way to offer a neutral starting point so audiences can really fall in love with these characters."

"It's not just a path that can be used for ethnic cultures," she adds, "but any topic that has a pre-conceived notion about it. I'm currently working at the Philadelphia Zoo doing education about extinction and I'm using puppetry for that. Our puppets are endangered animals so instead of me giving kids a lecture about why extinction is bad, I have an animal character that they can really identify with. In that way, as soon as you break the mould of what people expect to see, there's a world of possibilities and opinions that can be expressed."

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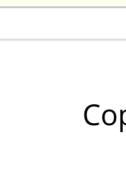
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