

'I ALWAYS FELT LIKE AN ALIEN': SACHLI GHOLAMALIZAD ON A REASON TO TALK

May 6, 2016

Milica Marković, Staff Writer/Editor

It's not often we get performances that incorporate non-theatrical characteristics in order to tell real stories about real people. This is precisely what Belgian actress Sachli Gholamalizad does in her multimedia piece, *A Reason To Talk*, opening tonight at the Theatre Centre in association with Theatre Royal Plymouth and Summerhall.

A young Iranian refugee with a background in theatre, Gholamalizad confronts the two significant women in her life, her mother and grandmother, in an attempt to understand the hardships they've both endured throughout their lives and why her relationship with her mother is troubled as a result of those hardships.

"One of the reasons why I wanted to put on this show was because I wanted to explore whether the difficult relationship between them, and my mother and I, is a generational or cultural thing," she explains, going on to say that she wonders whether she will pass this trauma that they carry onto her own children someday.

Gholamalizad describes the relationship she has with her grandmother as a "special bond," admitting that, while she was always there, she never really knew her until she started seeing her as an actual person and asking questions about the choices she made for her mother. She says that she was better able to understand the decisions her own mother made for her through her grandmother's stories.

Ultimately though, according to Gholamalizad, this is "a story about migration," and how her perceptions towards it influence the history and bond she has with her own family. When speaking about her immigration status, she says it's like being labeled, and she questions the way in which it makes her different from other people.

"The thing is, I always grew up with the idea of just being normal," she says, "until I found out that people have images about (immigrants). I always felt like an alien, because I wasn't like them."

It is this question about how people see and have expectations about one another that inspired Gholamalizad to use theatre as a "mirror for the world." The problem, she argues, is that, "we never accept people as they are," and so she finds it difficult to understand how people can assume that our relationships, especially with our mothers, are always perfect.

Because of this, she says she chooses to show realness on stage. She also reveals the two things she's always hated in theatre: perfectness, and perfect people.

"Most of the characters (in theatre) are always beautiful and sure of themselves, but they never show their real struggle with life and themselves," she says. "You have this idea of who you want to be, but then you also have the person that you are. You have to deal with that and struggle with yourself too, and all the sides that you hate but still make up who you are."

To truly showcase realism however, Gholamalizad draws attention to the digital nature of *A Reason To Talk*, because in her eyes, it is not enough to simply tell a story in order for people to understand it. Rather, through the aid of documentary-style interviews with her mother, soundscapes from Iran and Belgium, diary excerpts, images and novels, she says she wants to show audiences a side of Iran that they just don't know.

"Everybody has this image of Iran, (and) it's never the right image, (at least), how I perceive it, because when I (went back), I (saw) that Iran is totally different now," she says.

Thus, audiences can expect to see images of Gholamalizad exploring her country at a point in her life when she decided to return and rediscover it with her own senses.

Gholamalizad says she wishes to stress that her mother is not an actor, and that the point is to expose her raw emotions as she speaks in the video. When asked about their current relationship, she responded by saying that they still love each other and do not fight all the time. "That's the beauty of having a connection with your mother. You can cross boundaries and still love each other."

Gholamalizad also confirms that the performance has her mother's full support: "She knows it's a rough vision, but it's honest, and she knows that we're both showing ourselves in the purest (light)."

It is here where Gholamalizad proves once again that perfection is just not possible, "because we all have other expectations, other needs. What I needed from my mother, she couldn't give me, because she was just surviving all the traumas she (was going) through."

Her hope is that this play can help all people accept and openly discuss the fact that we all have a dark side that we are dealing with.

"This isn't a show just for Iranians, because Iranians come with their own prejudices, their vision of *their* Iran. This is not about one culture," she concludes, further stating that it's about humans struggling for acceptance as well as to accept themselves and one another. "I hope people will recognize that part of it, not (just) the Iranian part."