

practice *kalarippayattu* 'just for kicks' means recognising that the effects may not be on my theatre practice *per se* but on the *self* that approaches it.

## Thoughts on Globalisation and *The Female Terrorist Project*

Ken Urban

In 2003, I began writing a play about the phenomenon of female terrorists, called, appropriately enough, *The Female Terrorist Project*. The play is set in a dystopic United States, a few years in the future. I call it a dystopia because when I began writing, I thought John Kerry would win. The play follows a historian named Amelia who crosses the globe to interview women involved in terrorism. Amelia's five interviewees are based on actual women: Leila Khaled, who hijacked an American plane in 1969 to bring attention to the Palestinian cause; Shelley Shannon, a housewife from Oregon, who shot a doctor outside a Kansas woman's clinic in 1993; Zarema, a composite based on the Chechen 'Widows of War' who took over a theatre in Moscow in October 2002; Tahani Titi, a failed Palestinian suicide bomber, jailed in 2001; and Miss Kim Hyon Hui, a North Korean agent who, in November 1987, left a bomb on a South Korean Airlines flight before disembarking at a layover. While interviewing these women for her project, Amelia makes contact with a group of women actively involved in domestic terrorism against the state. When Amelia asks one of the cell members what they hope to achieve, the member replies:

An end to the wars abroad and at home  
 The preemptive wars declared on foreign countries  
 and their citizens  
 The war declared on the citizens of this country  
 The war against our civil liberties and the democratic way  
 And we do this by targeting the corporations that control this government  
 Hurting them where it affects them the most,  
 Economically.

The Department of Homeland Security grows interested in Amelia's research, and things escalate quickly.

My play focuses on the 'new age of terrorism' that historians date from about 1967 to the present. Terrorism was invented in the 18th and

19th centuries, but in the later half of the 20th century – in the wake of the Vietnam conflict, Castro's revolution and the student revolts in France – terrorism re-emerges with a vengeance. Terrorism is defined as a violent political action that has a far-reaching goal. The people carrying out the action see themselves as marginal or dispossessed. As a consequence, one person's terrorist is often another's freedom fighter. The actual targets of the terrorism (the people on the plane or in the restaurant) are never the main or sole audience for the event; the true audience is far from the site and learns about the event after the fact. While the nihilists and anarchists of the 19th and early 20th centuries directed their violence at members of the government, terrorists post-1960 did not see culpability residing in leaders alone, but in all citizens who support those leaders or benefit from their oppressive policies. In short, if you were a terrorist, the pool of potential targets widened dramatically.

This 'new age of terrorism' is often seen as a response to globalisation, to the advances and inequalities created by our increasingly interconnected world. The logic: when you have one, you have the other. But the exact relationship between the two is not necessarily that direct. What globalisation and terrorism share is a relationship to territory. Globalisation's primary impulse is to break down the boundaries that form territories, while terrorism's is to re-establish those boundaries, albeit in the terrorists' image. Literary critic Matthew Kaiser argues that the logic of territory is at the root, both psychologically and etymologically, of all terrorism. 'In terrorism', Kaiser writes, 'violence is committed against those who have territory, against a dominant force, by those who have been denied territory, who have been estranged from the earth'.

Territory is not necessarily geographical; it is also a spiritual and cultural category. The terrorists that I researched for my play constantly spoke of terrestrial estrangement: the Palestinian women who felt displaced from their homeland; the Chechen women involved in the theatre takeover who feared the destruction of their people and culture; Miss Kim, the North Korean agent, who destroyed the plane because her country perceived the 1988 Olympics in Seoul as a national affront. Even for Shelley Shannon, the American convicted of shooting a doctor, territory is at stake – the return of Christ's kingdom to a land spoiled by the killers of the unborn. Globalisation radically compresses the distance between countries, erodes the power of the nation state, exacerbates the disparity

between rich and poor and often shifts cultures toward a marriage of secularism and commodity fetishism. It deterritorialises, making that which was bounded and discrete into something permeable and indefinite. Terrorism is an attempt to reverse that process. It wants to return to the boundedness of territory; it reterritorialises. But current forms of terrorism use the forces of globalisation to achieve that end. Terrorism now depends on the deepening connection between the local and the distant, the widespread access to technological advances, and the reach of the global media to make its point. Think of the quickly disseminated images of the July 2005 attacks in the London Tube – images we would never have without the aid of cell phone cameras. Terrorism and globalisation need each other.

In the popular imagination, terrorists are almost always male. When I talk about the play, people often ask me, Why *female* terrorists? Or, *what* female terrorists? Terrorism experts often find themselves in an awkward place when they consider the issue. For instance, Walter Laqueur writes, 'Women terrorists are more fanatical and have a greater capacity for suffering. Their motivation is predominately emotional and cannot be shaken through intellectual argument'. That such a claim rests on stereotypes about women is so obvious it barely seems worth noting. Such biological and universal notions of women can also be found in interviews with women terrorists themselves. When journalist Eileen MacDonald asked Italian terrorist Susanna Ronconi if she found it difficult to be violent, Ronconi responded, 'The whole idea of violence is linked with maternity. It is the woman who gives life; it is the woman who also takes life.' Medea, anyone? Statements such as Ronconi's and Laqueur's might provide temporary comfort in that they give a rationale for why the 'gentler sex' would kill for a cause, or present a sweeping generalisation that experts can use in anti-terrorist training. (Consider the advice of Herr Lochte, the former director of the Hamburg Office for the Protection of the Constitution, 'For anyone who loves his life, it is a good idea to shoot the women first'.) But such claims don't really stand up to any scrutiny. In the end, there is no universal answer to why women become involved in terrorism, for there are as many reasons as there are terrorists.

What interested me in female terrorists was how the subject allowed me to side-step accepted ideas about terrorism. To put it politely: the media generally makes it hard to identify with male terrorists. Yet, women who kill remain an object of acute fascination. Leila Khaled and Miss Kim

received marriage proposals from male admirers. University students spoke of the women in the Red Army Faction in 1970s Germany in terms usually reserved for rock stars. These women are compelling objects of desire, worthy of close scrutiny. (This fascination could be linked to the figure of the *femme fatale*.) But attraction is always offset by acute repulsion. In documents concerning recent female suicide bombers in the West Bank, the Israeli government constantly reduces the women's actions to a question of male affirmation. One of the perks of globalisation is the amount of information it makes so readily available. Case in point: I find a 2003 profile of recent female suicide terrorists on the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) website, claiming, 'In each and every case, these women had a large amount of "personal baggage".' The document details this 'baggage' at length, ranking 'romantic motives' as one of the top three reasons for women's involvement in suicide terrorism. There is a simultaneous move, then, to make the figure of the female terrorist both empowered and weak, a site of desire and repulsion; at work is a circular logic that finds arousal in a danger that, in the end, it must contain or eradicate. Lurking beneath the marriage proposals and sexual fantasies is a hope that such a woman could be redeemed, but what gives rise to the desire in the first place is the fear that such a threat may never be controlled. Hence, the constant need to reduce these women to either the puppets of men or just plain 'abnormal' ('overly emotional,' 'irrational,' 'a possible lesbian').

The case of Tahani Titi fascinated me from the moment I read her account on the MFA website. The rise of female suicide bombers in the West Bank over the last five years is a major development. Journalist Barbara Victor, in her book *Army of Roses*, argues that the move toward Palestinian female equality in the 1980s was co-opted in the last decade by religious extremists. Liberation no longer meant a woman taking an equal stand in the struggle, but instead blowing herself up. The model for female resistance is no longer Leila Khaled, but Wafa Idris, the first woman to 'martyr' herself in 2002. Victor describes numerous cases of the cynical exploitation of young women by men for political gains. The story of Tahani Titi seems to prove Victor's argument tenfold. A 24-year-old academic, Titi is driven to consider suicide because of the abuse that she suffers at the hands of her father. Walid Sabih, Titi's ex-boyfriend and a wanted Tanzim operative, convinced Titi that if she was going to kill herself, she should do it for a good cause. Titi, the document notes, had never

shown any antipathy towards Israelis, but she is still in love with Sabih, despite knowing he is a 'womaniser', and so agrees to his scheme. Sabih arranged for Titi to be trained as a suicide bomber. Titi's mission, however, is a 'failure' and she is arrested. Again, the figure of the female terrorist is simultaneously empowered and disempowered: take action against your father's abuse, blow yourself up. But could there be more to her story? Could I imagine more for *my* Titi? Given the extreme tragedy of her life, I wanted my Titi to be funny and self-aware. Humor and suffering are good bedfellows; ask Beckett. All I know of Titi is contained in a grainy JPEG and three short paragraphs culled from an Israeli website. But what if?

Titi's final monologue to Amelia:

I was. Caught.  
 The bomb was not. Detonated.  
 I have been. Handled.  
 They laugh at. Me.  
 I had no choice, you see. I had to tell them where to find my beloved Sabih.  
 (Smiles.)  
 I imagine there are now Israeli soldiers with guns trained at his head.  
 Let me say again, I do not hate the Israelis.  
 I do not.  
 Goodbye Sabih.

My Titi, no mere victim, has concocted an elaborate revenge scheme. When Najla Said, Edward's daughter, did the part during a recent reading in New York, she got it. She tells me during rehearsal that her family knows a good number of terrorists; she's even met Leila Khaled. Najla also does stand-up comedy. A perfect combination. During Titi's final monologue, people laugh. But it is decidedly nervous laughter. No one is sure it's permissible. This pleases me.

What I find mesmerising about the figure of the female terrorist is what it reveals about power. These women exist in a liminal space. They are victim and victimiser, controller and controlled, master and slave. They are women who in a grand violent gesture both exceed and fail.

My favourite part of *The Female Terrorist Project* remains the play's final scene because it captures that double bind. Whether impelled by circumstances, influenced by her interviewees or fulfilling a hidden desire, Amelia joins a domestic terrorist cell and goes underground. In the play's final scene, Amelia and her fellow group member Karen are on an airplane, flying to an unknown future. Karen tells Amelia about her recurring dream, something

she promised Amelia during their first meeting that she would do one day. Fittingly, it is a dream about the globe:

Now, there's time. A promise is a promise. I can tell you my dream.

The captain announces our descent. We'll be on the ground in fifteen minutes.

An hour later we're still in the air. Something's not right. Something's happened. The plane circles and circles. We aren't going to land.

The captain's voice on the loudspeaker: Passengers. Crew. I'm not sure how to tell you. But. It's gone. All gone.

The runway

The airport

The city

The roads

The country

The globe

There's nowhere left to go.

The captain cries. His name is Sandy.

For a moment I am full of joy. Now that it's all gone, it can all begin again. Me and my fellow passengers – the Jewish lady with the turquoise jumpsuit and copper perm, the balding gentleman with the nose hairs and crucifix chain, the screaming baby with the eyes of a junky – we will rebuild the world here on this plane. Here, hovering above the destroyed earth, the world can be remade in our image. I laugh as Captain Sandy weeps louder and louder on the speaker somewhere above our heads. I stop, I remember. The plane will eventually run out of fuel. The plane will descend for a final time. Soon.

But until then we have won. Here, the world can be whatever we want it to be.

The man with the crucifix cries now too.

I whisper in his ear, Don't worry, I'm here for you.

With that, Karen kisses Amelia and thanks her for saving her life. Amelia can say nothing: her tongue has been cut off by an American interrogator.

## Doing A Geographical<sup>46</sup>

*David Greig*

I am a child of the 1970s so I couldn't help but feel a little thrilled when my plane landed, however

46. First delivered at Suspect Culture's conference, *Strange Behaviour: Theatre and Geography*, The Byre Theatre, St Andrews, 26 October 2005.