

“My wife in a Chador”. Interview: Claudio Angelini & His Theater

Natasha Lardera (December 05, 2014)



Written by Italian news personality Claudio Angelini, “My wife in a Chador” is a seriocomedy that raises a lot of questions. In the play “My wife in a Chador,” a Pulitzer Price nominated author resembling Norman Mailer is recruited to run for Mayor of New York. Coincidentally the author's wife, who is half Arabic, is mugged on the city's mean streets and is so traumatized by the crime that she decides to return to her Islamic roots and adopt the chador (head covering). The question then becomes: can a man campaigning with an Islamic wife win the mayoralty of our city?

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Written by Italian news personality Claudio Angelini, "My wife in a Chador" is a seriocomedy that raises a lot of questions. "The play moves back and forth between a political drama and a trenchant comedy. On the one hand, true to the author's Italian roots, it bears distinctive influences of commedia dell' arte. On the other hand, it presents the serious crisis of a couple divided between western culture and Islamic culture who manage to overcome their differences. There is also commentary on the specter of ISIS and Al Queda in American eyes, with the author suggesting that the threat to Westerners from Islamic fundamentalism can be defeated by love."

Claudio Angelini is a notorious Italian TV news reporter and author of 15 books of poetry, novels and essays. He was the Director of the RAI office of the Quirinale and the anchorman of Italy's National newscast Tg1 for over twenty years. He was also Director of the Italian Cultural Institute of New York, where he has been living for 18 years and where he currently serves as President of the Dante Alighieri Society and columnist for an Italian daily, Il Messaggero. Last season, Angelini made his NY playwrighting debut with the musical "Obama in Naples," and his latest play "My Wife in a Chador" has just wrapped.

We had a chance to ask him a few questions.

"My Wife in a Chador" started out as a novel and ended up as a play. What happened?

1) Yes, it started out as a novel which I stopped writing when I met director Stephan Morrow. I told him what I was writing and he really liked the idea. So I wrote the theatrical version, borrowing some lines from the novel and adding some new ones. I also worked on the male protagonist and mellowed him out. In the play he's become more generous, therefore more appealing as a candidate for the mayoral run - he gives a street performer a new saxophone, he offers a painting job to an unemployed bartender just to help him out. I also changed the ending: in the novel it is more ambiguous in regards to what happens to the female protagonist (Abeera) after she comes face to face with a killer the night before the elections. We don't know what happens to her, if she survives or not. In the play she definitely survives and she will provide precious advice to her husband who will become the mayor of NYC.

How did you get inspiration to write "My wife in a Chador" specifically, but overall what inspires you?

It's really hard to say. I can get inspiration from an idea, a sensation, an image, an experience, maybe something random. Two years ago, for example, when I wrote the musical "Obama in Naples" I was inspired by the Neapolitan audience who came to the presentation of my book on Barack Obama ("Obama: a Year of Challenges," published by Rizzoli). They were fascinated by the American president. During the presentation, which took place at the Circolo Artistico of Naples, I was showered with questions and that's when I understood people wanted a mayor like Obama. I immediately started writing the play and I completed it back in NYC. In the case of "My wife in a chador," I was inspired while at Starbucks as I was preparing to write an essay on America. Right in front of me there was a light skin girl wearing a chador; she was peacefully sipping on a cup of tea. I imagined she was an American citizen and, most likely, a woman committed in the liberation of women. I imagined that at times she would fight with her husband about the supremacy of either Islamic or Western culture. So, instead of writing the essay, I wrote a short story that I later sent to America Oggi. The story became a novel and then I stopped writing it in order to complete the play. Now I have picked up the novel again and I am finishing it up.

The play was defined a seriocomedy; there are both serious and less serious moments. Can you pick two, a serious and a light one, that you think are the most significant?

It's a serious play because there are moments of irony and of suspense. There is suspense during the attack on John and his wife, while irony prevails when John meets a fascinating girl in a pub and she



tries to seduce him. Yet, I think, the two most significant moments representing the two factors that are at the center of the play are: for the serious part, the scene where Abeera is willing to take off her chador in order not to interfere with John's election but he puts it back on her to show her his love and respect. For the ironic part, the scene where the Imam explains to Abeera that women have the same rights as men, but only up to a certain point. They need to appear inferior because they are... superior. They must work hard at home and take care of the kids because their role is more important... you get my drift.

Would a man with an Islamic wife, just like John and Abeera, be able to become the mayor of NYC? I think so, even in the next election. New York is a multiethnic and multicultural city and it is ready to take such a big step. Anyways, this is an existing problem everywhere. There are situations similar to John and Abeera's all over the world. There is a touch of maturity, courage, and most of all, of love to overcome cultural and religious differences everywhere. This is the message of my tale, a tale that can be performed everywhere in the USA and in Europe, especially in Italy.

What kind of city is NY towards the “different,” and “foreign”?

I've been living in New York for 18 years now, and I still don't feel like a New Yorker. Yet, I don't consider myself a Roman or a Florentine, meaning a citizen of the cities where I lived the longest. I am an immigrant who still loves his home country but who understands it less and less. I admire the USA, and NYC in particular, especially because it is not your typical American city. New York is everything, it is also Italy, an Italy that is different from the country where I used to live, because it is less bureaucratized and is more aware of its duties and rights. I wish our country would be inspired by this city and I am happy that my kids have followed me here. When I was the director of the Italian Cultural Institute I was glad to welcome so many interns, but then, when they had to leave, I felt bad for them because they had so many illusions. One of those illusions was the expectation of finding back in Italy a reality similar to the one they found in America. I thought of their disappointment, of their having to “re-live” the same old situations, the same old problems and issues. I think that coming here is good not only for a bunch of interns but also for politicians. And not for a short stay... New York can teach them a whole lot.

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