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The Imam (is): A Danger to the (Apartheid) State: A Review Essay

Director and Scriptwriter: Toyer Nakidien and Producer: Mogamat Cassiem de Vries. Acts I-II: Scenes 1-5 and Acts III-V: Scenes 1-11. Time: 1h30. Produced by: Qibla Muslim Movement. Staged: Joseph Stone Theatre, Cape Town. 4 October 2019.

Review Essay by: Muhammed Haron, University of Botswana/University of Stellenbosch.

Introduction

Imam Abdullah Haron (1924-1969) has, since his tragic killing at the hands of the notorious South African Security Branch (SB) on the 27th of September in 1969, become an iconic figure within and beyond South Africa's Muslim community. During the current year (2019) the Imam Haron Foundation (IHF), which was established during the latter part of 2018, initiated a string of activities; these started weeks before 28 May, 2019, and continued beyond 29 September, 2019, in order to commemorate the imam's life and ideas.

Apart from having partnered with other groups and organizations in hosting religious activities, IHF also successfully managed and coordinated educational cultural activities that offered insights to viewers, listeners, and participants as to who the imam was. These activities assisted in shedding some light on Imam Abdullah Haron's eventful life (circa 1955-1969) until the day he was forcefully apprehended by the SB on 28 May, 1969; from that fateful day until 27 September, 1969, he was held incommunicado.

During the time when these activities were underway, the Qibla Muslim Movement, which has been active since 1980 and has been in the vanguard in commemorating the imam's martyrdom, decided to script a play and have it staged; its producer (Mr. Mogamat de Vries) titled it 'A Danger to the State' and Qibla staged the play to portray aspects of the imam's life. According to the producer, it was done to also "...pay tribute to the Haron family... who had to endure the hardships of losing a husband, a father, friend and confidant" (*Danger to the State Brochure* [DtSB 2019], p.4). For the record, Qibla opted to produce and stage this play independently of the IHF. When Qibla pursued this ambitious project, its efforts were rewarded with sponsorship from the Surve Philanthropies Trust as well as the Cape-based Kaaf Trust and another anonymous donor (as far as this reviewer was informed).

Al-Quds and AwqafSA Performed Plays

According to *DtSB* (p.9), 'A Danger to the State' depicted key events that led up to and culminated in the imam's martyrdom. This play was directed and scripted by Toyer Nakidien who was mentored and guided by Hajji Isghaak (Ivan) Agherdien (d.2018); the latter was intimately involved in the production of the play 'A Man for Justice'; this play was hosted and produced by Masjid ul-Quds' drama team during 1995. Almost a decade after that play was performed AwqafSA staged another related play under a different title; this play was jointly hosted by the

University of Johannesburg and the Istanbul-based IRCICA during the 2006 International Congress of Islamic Civilization.

Both plays, it should be stated, were commendably produced and admirably performed despite their respective shortcomings; each act and scene portrayed the imam 'fully'; from this, one may conclude the following: first, that the script writers were familiar with some of the writings that were available about the imam; secondly, that they had not only read the texts but they made various attempts to extract what they could to engage the audience; and lastly, that the actors were absorbed in the script and thus provided a very good performance. As already indicated, like any other play, these two plays had their limitations but in spite of these they were able to convey the message about the imam's life quite adequately; and for this reviewer, this was and remained the important outcome.

The Play's Companions: A Book and a Documentary

Taking into account these observations, one would like to pose a few critical questions at this juncture before turning the focus to 'A Danger to the State' play: (a) Did the audience get a good understanding of who the imam was when they watched it? (b) What message was conveyed to the audience before they left and as they watched each act and scene? And (c) in which way did the play affect the sensibilities of each one who attended and what lessons did they learn from this play? Since this reviewer did not do a survey to hear what others had to say, he engaged a few individuals to listen to their views.

Reflecting on these questions and considering the fact that a plethora of material appeared during the past few years on the imam, this reviewer was very curious to know from those who attended the play whether they had read Barney Desai and Cardiff Marney's classic *Killing of the Imam* or watched Khalid Shamis' documentary *Imam and I* before seeing the play. The reason for this is based on the notion that anyone who desired to gain some basic insight as to who the imam was should have read the mentioned book and should have taken time to watch the documentary. From this reviewer's perspective, both were essential items before watching any play related to Imam Haron. However, since it is assumed that many who attended the Qibla play neither read that text nor watched the documentary, they should be encouraged to do so for basically two reasons: the one is to compare the contents of these two with what they had seen in the play, and the second is that it would help them to obtain an informed opinion about the imam's eventful socio-political religious life.

The Omar Interview: Scripting and Directing the Play

It is now the opportune moment to briefly turn to an interview that was conducted with Toyer Nakidien who not only scripted the play but who also directed the cast. Yunus Omar (*DtSB*, p.20), who is presently a lecturer at the University of Cape Town and worked alongside Nakidien at *Muslim Views* for quite a long while, stated that Nakidien desired to pay tribute to the imam and that he wanted to portray the imam's 'human side.' Omar revealed that Nakidien acknowledged that scripting this play, which was a means of paying homage to a humble icon, was part of his growth as an individual. Reflecting on the imam's life and comparing him with the manner in which Islam is being disseminated via the mosque pulpits, Nakidien questioned the type of Islam Muslims are presently practicing at the Cape.

Nakidien admitted in this interview that, "I do not claim that this play is the be-all and the end-all of the imam's life. But fifty years after Imam Haron's death, it is useful to demystify this community-oriented Imam; this ordinary man with such an extraordinary focus." Omar then

commented by saying that, “Nakidien offers a slice of history that will rekindle older fires....” At this point, this reviewer poses two interrelated questions based on his interview: Did Nakidien’s play rekindle older fires through his portrayal of the imam and did he succeed in making people angry as they watched this play? Worded differently, were members of the audience at the end the play outraged at what they saw?

Nakidien’s Signature Play: Towards a Critique

Before responding to these questions, it is important for this reviewer to offer a fairly brief description of the play’s contents. At the outset, one unhesitatingly wishes to state that the scriptwriter penned a rather simplistic script. The scriptwriter accommodated thirteen characters that naturally included the imam, his wife and their two eldest children. The play also featured the imam’s two friends, their three female neighbors, two SB officers, and the imam’s Langa contact. In addition, the scriptwriter penned in the Minister of Police and a medical doctor.

Nakidien divided the play into five acts with the first two containing two scenes and the last three acts consisting of 11 scenes. Most of the scenes in the first two acts occur at the Haron household with two turning attention to the office of the Minister of Police. Individual scenes, however, took place at the mosque and at the rugby stadium respectively. The focus of the play shifted to the period of the imam’s detention, and the final three acts mainly zoomed in on the cell and the interrogation room. Though the reviewer would like to have evaluated each scene, this would not be possible in this review essay; this being the case, he extracts selected issues and critically comments on them.

while the first three scenes are in order and somehow put the imam’s wife in the spotlight, as one person commented, one raises concerns about two scenes (Act II Scene 2 and Act II Scene 3). Factually, Lobi was a very young man at the time imam frequented Langa and the other African townships, and he had no inkling about the imam’s travels. It would have been spot on had the scriptwriter replaced the name Lobi with Shamiel Kula; as far as this reviewer knows, Kula was a key figure in that area during that time. He was the imam’s right-hand man during the late 1960s. Lobi was not featured even though he knew about the imam. The other person whose name should have been included was Hasan Ghila; the latter’s name could at least have been mentioned when the conversation took place between Kula (not Lobi) and the imam.

Secondly, an issue this reviewer found problematic and intriguing was the silly story about the neighbour and her sick cat! One is uncertain where the story originated. Interesting to note, all the neighbours in this play are Muslims! If the scriptwriter researched this social history he would have realized that most of the neighbours were non-Muslims; among them was former Minister Trevor Manuel’s family. And if the scriptwriter had taken time to do further research he would have come across the names of Mr. and Mrs Douglas Castle who were regular visitors at the Haron house. It seems that the scriptwriter had a Muslim audience in sight instead of mixed one; this was the observation of one of imam’s nephews who watched the play.

Thirdly, the scriptwriter could have benefitted from Desai and Marney’s text when he scribbled in the story of imam’s arrest on the eve of Prophet Muhammad’s) birth date. Even here the scriptwriter seemed to have had superficial knowledge about the imam’s arrest on that fateful day: 28 May, 1969. And when he narrated this scene he could have reflected on two issues: the reaction of the Haron household and the recording of responses from the imam’s congregation who expected him that evening to celebrate the Prophet’s birth. He too could, for example, have inserted the Davids brothers’ names: Boeta Salim and Boeta Hiema; and he could have chronicled

their anger at the apartheid state. It is indeed a pity that none of these important personalities were mentioned in passing or in any of the scenes.

Fourthly, it is well known that both SB officers were notorious in their methods when interrogating their prisoners. Now while the person was reasonable as he played the role of Van Wyk, the scriptwriter failed to add more juicy words into his mouth. Instead, the Van Wyk tediously and repeatedly asked the imam about what he did in Cairo, London and Langa. The scriptwriter could, at least, have added individual names to these places. It is admitted that Canon Collins was mentioned, but Van Wyk made no reference during interrogation about Barney Desai, who was imam's point person in London. In fact, when the imam went on pilgrimage to Mecca the scriptwriter could have made the audience aware of two facts: that the imam met Barney Desai in this sacred city and that the SB had their spies who reported on imam's activities. None of this came out in the interrogation room. Besides naming Desai, the scriptwriter did not insert in any of the dialogues that the imam was in touch with Pan Africanists in the townships. As a matter of information, on the opening night there were a few PAC members who attended and this reviewer seriously doubt whether any of them left with the knowledge that the imam was PAC's contact – in addition to others in the Cape. While one does not wish to be overly critical, these scenes revealed very little and one was notable to make out what the imam really stood and fought for.

And lastly, as the play came to a close, the scriptwriter had the burial on the stage with no commentary! One expected the scriptwriter to have had 'Shabier Seria' or 'Victor Wessels' speaking at the funeral prior to the performance of 'the ritual prayer of the dead' at City Park. The play ended, to a certain degree, abruptly and much more could have been penciled in to have made it a critical ending. The scriptwriter should have been more creative by, for example, either using James Matthews' production of a special issue *Muslim News* or by closing it with James Matthews' poem that asks whether the imam was a patriot or a terrorist; unfortunately, that was not to be.

In Conclusion

As this review comes to a close, the reviewer wants to state that, while he commends the efforts that were put into this play, he was very disappointed with the script's contents. The play's performance- which interestingly had no musical interludes - underlined that even though the scriptwriter consulted texts and others when he wrote the script, he did not check wide enough to ensure that the script contained relevant content. It differed markedly from the Al-Quds and AwafSA plays that were spoken about earlier. He should, for example, have shared it with this reviewer (whom he knows) or he could have done so by sharing the draft with colleagues at *Muslim Views* where he works.

In fact, a few weeks before the script was completed as far as this reviewer could assess, Farid Sayed – the *Muslim Views* (MV) editor – gave an insightful pre-sermon lecture titled “ The Imam of the ‘forgotten people’” that has since been published in *MV* (33[9]:20, September 2019); in this lecture he identified individuals that were deeply influenced, guided and mentored by the imam. For some reason, the scriptwriter missed the opportunity in extracting information from this lecture. He also did not look into the Shamis documentary that would have served him considerably by providing additional information that he could have inserted in the script. Alas, this was not to be! So while he wanted to kindle old fires, it is this reviewer's view that the director doused the fires; on top of that, instead of causing the audience to leave outraged at the apartheid state, it caused them to be mystified at the play's contents.

It is thus this reviewer's candid opinion that the play was a disappointment. And he thus wants to categorically state that before any organization or anyone who decides to pen a script on

the imam should confer with members of the Haron family or those who were/are intimately familiar with the imam's life. These individuals should be given the chance of vetting the draft; it is this reviewer's view that via a process of consultation that the scriptwriter/screenwriter would be able to produce an evenhanded play/film.

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