

guardian.co.uk

Abi Morgan: How I put the Taliban on stage

Acid attacks on schoolgirls, daily bombings and death threats - Abi Morgan on why she had to write a play that got behind the news

Abi Morgan
The Guardian, Thursday 9 April 2009

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)



Freedoms denied ... Abi Morgan's *The Night Is Darkest Before Dawn*, at the Tricycle Theatre in London. Photograph: Tristram Kenton

Plays are painful. Unlike the boot camp of television writing, there is no executive or producer shouting at you from the sidelines. You are left to your own devices. Plays are the marathon of scriptwriting. You fix on a point somewhere in the middle distance, and you start running, and you don't stop until you get to the end. The theory is that you have something you cannot not say: this is the engine that propels you through to the last page.

So when Nicolas Kent, artistic director of the Tricycle Theatre, approached me to write a half-hour play as part of a season of work about the last 100 years of Afghan culture and history, my instinct was to run. As I said, plays are painful.

I could write whatever I liked - "as long as it's after 2001. And not NGOs. Richard Bean's got that covered." As well as Bean, playwrights David Greig, Stephen Jeffreys, David Edgar and others had agreed to write new work.

On 7 October 2001, a series of strikes was launched on Afghanistan from US and British ships, submarines and bombers, signalling the start of Operation Enduring Freedom. We have been watching daily reports of bombings ever since - the stuff of nightmares.

Our plan was to look beyond the carnage of the last eight years into Afghanistan's culture and history, the lives lived through 100 years of peace and conflict. I read books, listened to interviews, scoured newspaper articles, and tried and failed to meet war correspondents, who were endlessly leaving to go and do the important business of

war reporting. How could a play compare to everything I was seeing and hearing on the news? What better way to understand a country than through the facts?

In 2002, after 25 years of war, a team including Unicef and Unesco representatives visited Afghanistan and calculated that its educational system would require \$1.24bn of US investment. Demand for education was still strong, with more than 500 girls showing up on the first day of school in a traditional area of Afghanistan: Griskh in Helmand province. Worse were the stories of the acid attacks on these girls, sporadic in 2002, but more frequent since. Supporters of the Taliban have attacked schoolgirls in the street, angered that they should now demand an education after years of being denied this basic freedom.

The urge to write kicked in. Here was a chance to illuminate a world where school is a luxury, and where the decision to become a teacher in Afghanistan - particularly a female teacher - could mean courting death. I wrote quickly, fuelled by this urgency - a half-marathon rather than the full 26 miles, but still. After years of writing for television and films (including the screenplay for Brick Lane and Channel 4's Sex Traffic), it felt good to finish.

My play is set six months after the Taliban have been driven out by US and British intervention; a local Afghan teacher travels with an American charity worker to visit a family she once knew. Already she has nine girls who have agreed to come back to join her class; she needs six more to qualify for the funding the US charity offers. But the father is an opium dealer, and when his daughter can make \$5,000 a year from picking poppies in a single field, why educate her? *The Night Is Darkest Before the Dawn* explores the tensions of a country wary of American intervention, and still reeling from an oppressive regime that might return at any time.

Within weeks, the play is up and running, and I am now undergoing the weird, out-of-body experience of watching my characters make the leap from page to stage. I angst. Does it make sense? Is it accurate? Reports on the passing of a new family law in Kabul, signed by President Hamid Karzai - despite UN concerns - made last week's news. A copy of the draft bill states: "It is the responsibility of the wife to prepare for sexual satisfaction of her husband and not leave the house without permission, unless there is the need or difficulty." It is archaic, and though the version signed by Karzai supposedly allows a wife to refuse sex on the basis of "lawful or logical excuses or with permission of her husband", it is disturbing at a time when there had been signs of positive change. It confirms for me even more that theatre needs to be responding to what is happening on the world stage.

A grainy image I saw on the web, filmed on a mobile phone, of a burka-clad woman being flogged in Pakistan's Swat valley, haunts me. The woman had been accused of "illicit relations" with a man and was lashed more than 30 times. The Taliban took responsibility for the flogging. Last month, a 75-year-old widow in Saudi Arabia was sentenced to 40 lashes and four months in jail for mingling with two young men who were not close relatives. Two months earlier, the New York Times reported that 14 women, all students and teachers in Kandahar, had been attacked with acid. It happened as I was taking my daughter to school.

Plays are painful. But the very act of writing is a basic freedom denied some women. Some would call it a privilege. So what's a little pain?

• **The Great Game** opens at the Tricycle Theatre, London NW6, on 17 April, with Abi Morgan's *The Night Is Darkest Before the Dawn* in rep from 19 April. Details: 020-7328 1000 or tricycle.co.uk

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2010