

SHAFANA AND AUNT SARRINAH: SOFT REVOLUTION

By Alana Valentine

PLAYREADING 2017



TEACHERS RESOURCE NOTES

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Have you ever experienced a time in your life where you felt you were on the edge of the world and everything was possible and you were invincible? I have. A time when you wanted to express yourself and you were shut down because you spoke out against the status quo? I have. Or, have you been criticised by those close to you and by strangers because you look different – your hair too short/too coloured/too covered/too many piercings/too skinny/too fat/clothes are too short/too long? I have. And do you know **that** person or those people who always have something to say to you, who know better, even if you don't want to hear it? I do. They have come before you and want to impart their knowledge, their wisdom, their way. In their eyes they want to protect you.

In Alana Valentine's play, *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah*, we meet Shafana a young woman on the edge of the world. She, like so many (young) people, is working out what her journey is, and she does work it out. She wants her life to reflect this journey. The one person in the world she wants support from, her Aunt Sarrinah, hesitates.

This play is so much about that generational divide. It is about making choices and fearing the rejection of a person you love as a result of telling them about a decision you have made. It's about the fear of difference and how that affects the human spirit. It is about tolerance, the lack of it and the need for it. It is about two women, who will challenge you on what you might expect two Muslim women to be. This play will surprise you, as it surprised me.

Claudia Chidiac

CAST AND CREATIVES

Director: Claudia Chidiac



Claudia is a theatre maker, cultural worker and creative producer. For fifteen years, she has worked with young people, migrant and refugee communities living in Western Sydney. From 2010 – 2014 she was the Creative Producer of Performance and Music and Theatre Producer/Curator at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre (CPAC) She was responsible for creating and producing the award-winning Way Out West (WOW) Festival for Children and in 2013 she produced and directed Tough Beauty by Finegan Kruckemeyer.

From 2005 – 2010 she was the Artistic Director and EO of Powerhouse Youth Theatre (PYT), Western Sydney's leading youth theatre company, where she was responsible for directing, and producing the company's artistic program and developing training opportunities for emerging artists in Western Sydney, for CPAC.

Assistant Director: Mary Jekki Acosta



Mary Jekki Acosta is a teacher at Western Sydney's Bonnyrigg High School. She is trained to teach English, Drama and Entertainment Industry. Mary brings her experience to her school's musicals. Her interest in theatre began in 2003, when she performed in Sucked In with Powerhouse Youth Theatre in association with Accessible Arts.

Since that time, Mary has performed in various productions including I Do ... But (2005) and ATYP's This Territory (2007) at The Sydney Opera House. She has also served on the board of Fairfield's Powerhouse Youth Theatre in many capacities, including Deputy Chairperson. Mary is a passionate writer and eater who spends much of her spare time composing her food blog, GetDucked. Her recent appearance on the SBS food show The Chef's Line combined all of her great loves: food, performance and teaching.

Aunt Sarrinah: Aanisa Vylet



Aanisa Vylet is an actor, writer and auteur from Western Sydney. Recent acting credits include *Martyrs* (STC 2016), *Arch: Politics of Fragmentation* (Biennale of Sydney, 2016), *Bengal Tiger and Bagdad Zoo* (Mad March Theatre Co, 2017) and her debut self-devised show: *The Girl* which was shortlisted for the *Phillip Parsons playwriting award* and nominated for *West Australian Arts Editor Award* in 2015. She is currently part of the 2017 Belvoir Artist Program and is 2017 recipient of the *Southlands Breakthrough Artist Residency Award* for the development of her second play, *The Woman*.

Shafana: Zainab Kadhim



Zainab is a South-West Sydney based poet and musician who avidly addresses themes of social inequality, politics and self-reflection in her works. In 2013, she wrote songs for a theatre production at Casula Powerhouse called 'Tough Beauty'. Since then, two of her works 'Journey' and 'A Temporary Life' were chosen to feature in the Horns Playlist which are being played through sound horns created by public art sculptors Susan Milne and Greg Stonehouse. In 2015, she performed a song she wrote in response to the poem Reason and Passion in the Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet: REMIX* show at Bankstown Art Centre, and supported international artist Omar Offendum at his exclusive concert in Sydney.

Last year, her experimental spoken word video was exhibited at Casula Powerhouse and Fairfield Gallery and Museum as part of the Iraqi Cultural Festival. She also made her acting debut at Riverside theatre as The Poet in National Theatre of Parramatta's- *The Cartographers Curse*. She shared her story on a panel that centred on transnational responses to injustice as part of Vivid Ideas Sydney and supported Akala at his Akala, Artists and Community Talks event by Sydney Ideas at the Seymour Centre. In 2016, NSW Parliament House also saw Zainab bring Hip Hop music to the International Women's Poetry and Arts Festival, as well as Triple J's- *The Plot Music Festival* and *The Metro Theatre*.

KEY IDEAS

By Mary Jekki Acosta and Claudia Chidiac

There are various examples of acceptance and rejection in this play. The titular characters face their own battles, intellectually, culturally and spiritually. Shafana, an intelligent and strong minded young woman is eager to achieve academically. In doing so, she seeks the acceptance and sense of pride from her family. Shafana also hopes to use her intellect and qualifications to make an impact on the world, possibly as a teacher. Similarly, Aunt Sarrinah uses her intellect and qualifications to gain respect and acclaim in her career as an engineer. Both women seemingly find acceptance through their intellectual pursuits. Aunt Sarrinah's position as a chief Engineer in Afghanistan is lost as a result of migration to Australia. The language barrier and the undeniable cultural shift is a source of fear and rejection. Even Sarrinah's very own niece, Shafana, is dismissive of her Aunt in a flashback which displays Sarrinah's lack of proficiency in the English language. Aunt Sarrinah is driven to complete her PhD in English, despite being a recognised professional in Afghanistan. Sarrinah knows how quickly tables can turn and therefore clings onto acceptance. When Shafana brings up the idea of wearing a hijab, a visible sign of her Islamic faith, Sarrinah's sense of acceptance is threatened. What Shafana sees as spiritual enlightenment and deep acceptance within her faith, Sarrinah sees as a danger. In a political climate full of prejudice, fundamentalism and misrepresentation of Islamic faith, Sarrinah seeks to protect herself and Shafana from the rejection that comes with outward expressions of Islamic faith. Sarrinah also fears that Shafana will get caught up in fundamental thinking. As a former victim of fundamental oppression, Sarrinah refuses to accept Shafana's individual expression of faith. Sarrinah's own faith is internal and private, where it is non-threatening to others, and therefore does not attract blatant rejection from wider Australian society. All of this is done with the backdrop of a science laboratory; a symbol of intellect and progress, and a homely kitchen; where Afghan culture and the value of family are upheld through the cooking and sharing of meals. Both of these intelligent, articulate and strong women seek acceptance, through their intellect, culture and spirituality, yet they create a sense of exclusion and rejection between one another, simply by living their lives in the way that feels right for them. The play's tension rises as Shafana faces the rejection of her very own beloved Aunt.

The generational conflict between Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah is apparent. Shafana displays many of the hallmarks of youth. She is avidly exploring her own identity, is self-assured, idealistic and full of hope for the future. Aunt Sarrinah sees this youthful attitude as dangerous and unrealistic. Sarrinah contrasts Shafana, as she is hyper aware of the way that choices create consequences. She is so aware that it stifles her own expression in an effort to fit in. Her response to transition is deeply informed by her own life experiences. In her past, Sarrinah witnesses the reactions of others due to her language, culture and religion. In one flashback, Sarrinah's failed attempt at blending in as a Pakistani woman in a *chador* reveals her illegal immigrant status, thus endangering her. In another flashback, Sarrinah goes as far as to read '*Who Weekly*,' the stereotypical reading material of middle aged female Australian women, in order to mask her difference and fit in with others. Her monologue regarding her experience while working in Australia reveals the lengths she goes to, simply to fit in and get by. As well as providing some comic relief, Aunt Sarrinah's Nigella Lawson impersonations reveal her desire to imitate and emulate those who are palatable

and popular. In stark contrast, the audience is presented with Shafana. She proclaims not to care about how others perceive her, as long as she is true to God, and in turn, herself. Shafana sees the injustice and misrepresentation of Islamic faith and wants to fight it. When Sarrinah confronts Shafana with all of the atrocities that extremists have been responsible for, Sarrinah makes Shafana acutely aware that she will become questioned on such matters. Shafana courageously, and possibly naively, indicates that she will answer. She will clarify the murkiness and right the perceived wrongs when given the opportunity. Shafana's bullet-proof exterior and staunch resolve to stand up and fight contravenes Aunt Sarrinah's way of existing. Aunt Sarrinah seems to know her understated place and finds comfort in its familiarity. The two women are at odds. Aunt Sarrinah knows the world and is disillusioned with the notion of change. Shafana is brimming with youth and hope, and is ready to commence her very own 'soft revolution.' This generational gap heightens as the women express their attitudes and beliefs around change.

PROCESS

Prior to starting rehearsals, we had all agreed that we would conduct research into the subject matter. This would assist in informing our understanding of the cultural and social contexts of the play. Our process was centred around: research, community knowledge and discussion. The research into this work was about collating information on Afghanistan's history and present; the representation of Afghani's in Australia and talking with young Afghani women about the play. In particular, about the representation of Muslim women from within the community and the general public perception of Muslim women who wear the hijab and or chador. When we sat together, for the first time, we had a cold read of the play and then went on to analyse the script, page by page. The discussion between the actors, the assistant director and myself were so enriching and enlightening. The two actors are Muslim women who could offer insight into the script from a community, faith and women's perspective. These discussions could not have happened the way they did, if they were not of the Muslim faith.

HOW WE WOULD STAGE THIS?

If we were to stage this play, the production design would need to reflect a world of the indoor life /work and home of the two characters – a science lab and the home of Aunt Sarrinah.

The blocking of the actors would shift between close proximities and distance of each other. Between the domestic intimacy being highlighted to the physical distance between the two as the tension arises throughout the play. As well as the intimate connections, showing the joy between the characters through the Bollywood dancing and sharing food with each. The flashbacks would be signified through lighting cues and minor costume changes, such as the wearing or removal of a lab coat.

It would be worth watching the two actors, sitting side by side, each in their own space contemplating their actions and thoughts.