

Yalda

by
Roya Amiri and Dave Windass



Education Pack



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About this resource

This resource is designed to support *Yalda: Iranian Woman*, put the play into context and provide additional creative and cross-curricular activities to enhance the production. The play is still a work in progress and, as such, this education pack is also a working document.

The pack contains information and thoughts about the production and also background reading and research about the themes and issues covered in the play, as well as information about Iran and its people. The pack is created with audiences, students and community groups in mind.

The pack is intended to prompt discussion and debate.

We offer workshops in storytelling and also about the play's central themes. We aim to reveal the creative process in as many ways as possible to share the excitement and knowledge of making theatre and telling stories. We also offer free pre and post-show discussions.

Story

Yalda has returned to spend 'the longest night' with her English mother and Iranian father in the east of post-industrial northern British city.

Yalda wants to escape her parents' grip and head to a place where real life might be possible. She's always on the lookout for adventure and dreams of fun and wild abandon; much to her father's dismay, who doesn't want boys, never mind men, anywhere near her.

Yalda, not quite English and not quite Iranian but definitely – especially to everyone she meets - 'other', ponders what it would have been like if she'd been born in Iran. Although she wouldn't have been born at all, because her mother and father would never have met.

And they're never going back to Iran as a family either. Her father arrived in the UK having fled the Iranian Revolution of 1979, along with 8,000 of his countrymen. He arrived in this city and stayed. Why here, of all places, Yalda can't imagine. This place has nothing going for it. It was inevitable that he'd end up working as a cabbie, a job that saw people calling him and his family all kinds of names and, in more recent times, accuse them of terrorism.

The play looks at the way in which Yalda, now a woman, experienced England as she grew up and what her place is in contemporary Britain. We follow her from school to adulthood, sharing the confusion she suffered due to her otherness, the racism and hostility she had to deal with, the accusations she was faced with and the incredible moments of humour she experienced due to cultural differences and miscommunication. She also has a baffling upbringing, enjoying but often dismayed by the unique experiences of food and customs her parents try and maintain in the house. The war between Iran and Iraq has only added to the confusion, not least among those that are quick to label her.

Life gets better when Yalda, an agnostic who doesn't share her father's belief, starts to experience and then embrace the cultural life of her father who, beyond the takeaway, revels in his Persian spirituality and heritage. He is an enchanting figure and Yalda realises that, in many ways, her desire to live her own life and her spirit of freedom is a direct response to her father's strong personality.

Ultimately, Yalda is searching for something unattainable – to be 'normal' – and she aims to get there by working out what she values and what it is that really matters to her. She doesn't know where life might lead her, only that she is not the person that her parents think she is or want her to be.

This is a funny and energetic picture of adolescence, womanhood and an exploration of the impact of diaspora on second-generations.

The production uses simple storytelling methods to explore all aspects of the life of a young woman with Yalda's background and experiences.

The play addresses an absence of similar work about the displaced Iranian community and their families. It will be informed by first-hand accounts, extensive research and community workshops.

Workshops

There are lots of untold stories that should be shared with others. Ours - Yalda: Iranian Woman - is just one of many. We would like to tell you more about the story that we are working on and also encourage you - and members of your community - to share unique and distinctive stories too.

Yalda is about a half-Iranian, half-British woman growing up in Hull. Her story is a hard-hitting picture of dealing with her background, adolescence and her journey into womanhood, whilst also attempting to 'belong' in her city of birth. There are many issues in Yalda's life but her story is also funny, energetic, moving and entertaining.

During workshops we can perform a short extract from the Yalda script, discuss the themes and issues raised and offer you the opportunity to participate in storytelling activities that will enable you to share your own personal experiences and stories about living in the UK.

We are happy to tailor and adjust the content of these workshops to suit the needs of your community.

Roya Amiri and Dave Windass

Roya Amiri trained at Birmingham School of Acting and is an actor, performer, writer, stand-up, singer and workshop leader. She recently collaborated on the creation of site specific production *The Whitsun Weddings* (Ensemble 52), working with Dave Windass to create a piece that looked at the cultural differences between Iranian and western marriage ceremonies. For *Images of Elsewhere's An Ode To My Sisters* (Dir: Yasmin Gurreeboo and Lucy Bradley) she performed in a piece of work that looked at the lives of Muslim women in Britain. Other work for theatre includes *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Distraction Theatre Company), the number one tour of *Dinner Ladies* (2010), *Disposable People* (2007), and a number of unique Shakespeare productions for 1623 Theatre Company. Television credits include HBO's *Hunted* (2012), Jasper Carrot's *All About Me* (BBC/Celador, 2004) and *Casualty* (BBC). She has also appeared in numerous adverts and corporate films, worked on many theatre-in-education projects and has led many workshops with a diverse range of participants.

Dave Windass is a writer and playwright who has worked to commission for Hull Truck Theatre, Mahogany Opera Group, the BBC and others. He is a member and director of theatre company Ensemble 52. Recent work includes site-specific project *The Whitsun Weddings*, which was performed on-board a moving train, and World War One radio drama *Yearning Hearts*, part of a large-scale BBC community outreach project. He worked closely with Hull's Gypsy & Traveller community, culminating in the text and image exhibition *To Be Able To Pull Up and Sit and Have a Chat Around The Fire* (Future Ferens). Other theatre includes *City Sketch*, *Euphoria*, *Ballroom Blitz*, *On A Shout*, *Sully*, *Kicked Into Touch*, *Firestarter*, *Thinspiration* and festive shows for Middle Child Theatre Company. Online projects include *Butterflies and Battlefields*, a collaboration with photographer Jerome Whittingham about the battle with dementia in the home, and interactive digital storytelling project *Open Threads* (Cascade Arts). He has facilitated writing workshops for a wide range of organisations, including Hull Truck, Stephen Joseph Theatre, Sheffield Young Writers, Hull School of Art & Design and University of Hull. He is a trained journalist with countless articles published, and has worked for *The Big Issue* in the North, *The Stage*, *Emap*, and *whatsonstage.com*. He worked as a lecturer at Hull School of Art & Design (2009-2014), co-organises Hull's *Heads Up Festival*, co-founded arts venue *The Other Space* (now *Kardomah94*) and has compèred and chaired many Humber Mouth and Head in a Book literature events.

Iran

Full name: Islamic Republic of Iran

Population: 75.6 million (UN, 2012)

Capital city: Tehran

Major religion: Islam

Major language: Persian. Persian, also known as Farsi, is the most widely spoken member of the Iranian branch of the Indo-Iranian languages. Persian, Gilaki and Mazandarani and Luri account for 75% of the language spoken in Iran. Other languages include Azerbaijani and other Turkic dialects (11%), Kurdish (10%), Balochi (2%) and 2% includes other languages; Turkmen, Georgian, Armenian, Circassian, Assyrian, Hebrew, and Brahui.

Life expectancy: 72 years (men), 75 years (women) (UN)

Monetary unit: 10 Iranian rials = 1 toman

Main exports: Petroleum, carpets, agricultural products. Iran has an abundance of energy resources, with natural gas reserves second only to those of Russia and holding nine per cent of world oil reserves.

Iran is a Middle Eastern country south of the Caspian Sea and north of the Persian Gulf. It shares borders with Iraq, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Armenia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

Iran became an Islamic republic and theocracy in 1979, when the Pahlavi monarchy was overthrown and clerics assumed political control under leader Ayatollah Khomeini.

Persia, as Iran was known before 1935, was one of the greatest empires of the ancient world, and the country has long maintained a distinct cultural identity within the Islamic world by retaining its own language and adhering to the Shia interpretation of Islam.

The region now called Iran was occupied by the Medes and the Persians in the 1500s BC, until the Persian King Cyrus the Great overthrew the Medes and became ruler of the Achaemenid (Persian) Empire, which reached from the Indus to the Nile at its zenith in 525BC. Persia fell to Alexander in 331–330BC and a succession of other rulers: the Seleucids (312–302 BC), the Greek-speaking Parthians (247BC – AD 226), the Sasanians (224–c. 640), and the Arab Muslims (in 641). By the mid-800s Persia had become an international scientific and cultural centre. In the 12th century it was invaded by the Mongols. The Safavid dynasty (1501–1722), under whom the dominant religion became Shiite Islam, followed, and was then replaced by the Qajar dynasty (1794–1925).

During the Qajar dynasty, the Russians and the British fought for economic control of the area, and during World War I, Iran's neutrality did not stop it from becoming a battlefield for Russian and British troops. A coup in 1921 brought Reza Kahn to power. In 1925, he became Shah and changed his name to Reza Shah Pahlavi. He subsequently did much to modernise the country and abolished all foreign extraterritorial rights.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 put an end to Pahlavi rule. The Shah had alienated powerful

religious, political and popular forces with a programme of modernisation and Westernisation coupled with heavy repression of dissent.

In 2002, US President George W Bush declared Iran to be part of an "axis of evil". While Bush's successor, Barack Obama, has softened his tone, Washington continues to accuse Iran of trying to develop nuclear weapons.

Iran built its first atomic power station - at Bushehr, in the south of the country - with Russian help, and says its nuclear ambitions are peaceful. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was president from 2005 to 2013, insisted that Iran had an "inalienable right" to produce nuclear fuel.

In 2010, the UN voted to impose a fourth round of sanctions on Iran over the issue. Two months later, Tehran announced that engineers had begun loading fuel into the Bushehr plant and described this as a milestone in the country's drive to produce nuclear energy. Following sanctions in 2012, a deal to restrict uranium enrichment was struck in November 2013.

Iran has been led by a highly conservative clerical elite since 1979 but there is a gulf in Iran between conservatives and reformers. Former President Mohammad Khatami's support for greater social and political freedoms made him popular with the young - an important factor as around half of the population is under 25. But his relatively liberal ideas put him at odds with the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and with hardliners reluctant to lose sight of established Islamic traditions.

Self-proclaimed moderate Hassan Rouhani was elected to the presidency in 2013 but the domestic divide remains deep.

A displaced community

Emigration movements are part of Iranian history. Iran has produced and hosted abundant flows of emigration and immigration, a steady coming and going for the most part driven by key political events. Iran has high rates of 'brain drain' while simultaneously topping the list as the world's largest refugee haven, mainly for Afghans and Iraqis. Iran also has one of the largest urban growth rates in the world, due to internal migration from rural areas.

At the end of 2005, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated there were 111,684 refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other persons of concern from Iran. The countries hosting the largest populations of Iranian refugees were Germany (39,904), the United States (20,541), Iraq (9,500), the United Kingdom (8,044), the Netherlands (6,597), and Canada (6,508).

The exact size of the Iranian diaspora (those dispersed from their original homeland) is unknown, but is commonly estimated at two to four million people. National census information suggests that the figure is around one million.

The Iranian diaspora is very diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion, social status, language, gender, political affiliation, education, legal status, and timing and motivation for departure (ranging from political to sociocultural to economic). While the majority of the Iranian

diaspora are Persian in origin, there are also large communities of Azeris, Kurds, Assyrians, Turkmens, and Armenians. A religious divide also exists between the majority, who are Shi'ia Muslims, and minority groups, such as the Baha'is, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Sunni Kurds.

Yalda Night

Yalda Night is a traditional Iranian celebration of the longest night of the year (the Winter Solstice) in the Northern Hemisphere, which has remained popular since ancient times. The festival dates back to the time when a majority of Persians were followers of Zoroastrianism. On this night family members get together (usually in the house of the eldest member) and, protecting each other from evil, stay awake all night long. Iranians believe those who begin winter by eating summer fruits will not fall ill during the cold season.

Persian poets

Persian literature is one of the world's oldest forms of literature. Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (also known as Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Balkhī), more popularly known as Rūmī, was a 13th century Persian poet, jurist, Islamic scholar, theologian, and Sufi mystic. Rumi's influence transcends national borders and ethnic divisions, proving popular with Iranians, Tajiks, Turkish, Greeks, Pashtuns, other Central Asian Muslims, and the Muslims of South Asia. Saadi, also of the 13th century, is widely recognised as one of the greatest poets of the classical literary tradition. The work of 14th century Persian poet Khwāja Shams-ud-Dīn Muhammad Hāfez-e Shīrāzī, also known as Hāfez and Hāfiz, can be found today in most homes in Iran.

Women and Iran

Although the attitudes of the Iranian public to women's rights are far more varied, the government of the Islamic Republic promotes discriminatory policies and has responded to the peaceful activism of Iran's women's rights movement with systematic oppression. In recent years, many women have been subjected to prison sentences or corporal punishment for their participation in the campaign for One Million Signatures for the Repeal of Discriminatory Laws.

During the reign of Reza Pahlavi the Shah of Iran - and the subsequent rule of his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, women's rights reached new heights and many legal barriers obstructing women's rights were dismantled.

After the 1979 Revolution, some achievements, including several laws favouring women's rights, were simply overturned by the clerics who took power.

With the establishment of the Islamic republic, most of the provisions of the Pahlavi era's Family Protection Law were abandoned. Personal freedoms, which before the revolution were more or less tolerated, came under severe attack by the revolutionaries. Women were forced to don the hijab, and any form of resistance to the closely monitored dress codes for both men and women was met with harsh punishment, including public flogging. Ancient retribution laws that entailed the cutting off of thieves' hands and the stoning of adulterers - which, in fact, had rarely been performed in medieval Iran - were enforced in many parts of the country.

A new Constitution was adopted which established Islam as the basis for the legal system. The new Constitution paid special attention to women, allegedly because of "the greater oppression that they suffered under the old regime." The language of Article 21 of the Constitution (Women's Rights) reflects the deep roots of patriarchy which views women as human beings with undeveloped personalities who only fit traditional roles in a family.

In October 2014, acid attacks against at least eight young women in Isfahan - who were targeted for not following Iran's strict dress code - immediately evoked protests in that city and Tehran. However, hardliners within Iran's conservative-dominated parliament have been trying to pass a bill that would protect vigilantes trying to enforce Islamic law.

British-Iranian woman Ghoncheh Ghavami was sentenced to one year in prison in Iran in November for trying to attend a volleyball game. Iran has a long-standing ban on women attending big sporting events with men. More than 700,000 people signed a petition calling on the Iranian authorities to release Ghavami.

Younger citizens are protesting against the Iranian authorities and resisting the Government's laws on clothing and behaviour, although are faced with tough punishments.

A group of seven young Iranian men and women who were filmed dancing to the song 'Happy' were given suspended sentences and 91 lashes after posting their home made 'Happy in Tehran' music video on YouTube.

In November 2014 an Iranian woman filmed herself defying Iran's restrictive laws against

women by dancing to a song by British pop group Little Mix with her hijab around her shoulders. The unidentified young woman can be seen energetically dancing on a train in Tehran while other passengers hold the camera. The woman is actually breaking two laws in the ultra-conservative country, where dancing in public is prohibited.

In 2014 Iranian women posted 'selfies' on social media without their hijabs and using #mystealthyfreedom as a hashtag.

The Hijab

Hijab generally refers to clothing such as the veil and the headscarf, worn by Muslim women as a symbol of modesty. Muslim men also observe similar standards through modest dress.

The hijab involves wearing clothing that is not tight fitting and that covers a woman's body with the exception of her face, hands and feet. This is required when a woman would be in the presence of men who are not closely related to her. The hijab is not required in front of a woman's father, husband, brothers, sons, grandfathers, grandsons, father-in-law, sons-in-law, nephews, minor male children or elderly men.

Traditional Muslim clothing not only reflects the culture of the people and creativity of the clothiers, it comes from a time honoured tradition of using locally grown materials, organic dyes and is especially suited to the climatic conditions of each region. Within this huge range of fashion is a simple unifying principle – modesty.

The minimum level of covering tolerated by Iran's Islamic establishment is a headscarf and a manteau (a loose coat). The official line from the Islamic establishment is that "hijab is protection from sin".

Modesty is not limited to clothing. Muslim men are obligated to treat women with respect, dignity and honour. Ogling or leering at women is forbidden. Inappropriate touching or remarks are also forbidden. Making a woman feel that she is being objectified or harassed in any way is not only against Islamic principles and values, it is considered a serious character flaw.

Themes: Women and sexuality

Human sexuality is a form of expression between people that creates bonds and communicates emotion. Sexuality has an impact on identity, self-esteem, relationships with others, societal mores, legal codes and more. Women's sexuality is exploited by industries such as advertising, the media and entertainment. Feminism holds that sexuality is a social construct.

Sexual behaviour exists for more than simply procreation. In many societies and for many years women have been principally defined by their roles as sexual beings. The view of sexuality as 'taboo' and 'shameful' is not unique to any particular religious or ethnic group.

Socialisation shapes our ideas about sexuality and gender and also what it means to be a "man" or a "woman." There is an inherently unequal relationship between these two categories and these two identities are set up as opposites.

"Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other."

– **Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex.**

Themes: Otherness

Simone de Beauvoir argued that 'otherness' is a fundamental category of human thought. No group ever sets itself up as the 'one' without at once setting up the 'other' against itself.

There is a complex issue of identity among those with mixed heritage, like our character Yalda. Yalda's otherness is a family legacy; her mother an English woman, her father an Iranian Muslim. Yalda's father was definitely 'other' in his new surroundings on arrival in England. Yalda's mother was constrained by the limited options available to her when growing up in a less than equal era.

What also complicates and adds to the sense of otherness for those of mixed heritage is the way that they look. Thus, Yalda is neither English nor Iranian in every sense. She has often been mistaken for 'something else', or, something 'other'. Yalda lives a life that is neither here, nor there.

Like others in a similar position, Yalda is left asking herself 'Who am I?' 'What am I?' 'How do I want to be known?'. How does she want to be known not only to others, but to herself? She is looking for clarity and self-acceptance; coming to terms with being other at the same time as wanting to belong.

Do you feel a sense of otherness?

How clear do you consider your cultural identity to be?

Themes: Racism

Racism: *The belief that all members of each race possess characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to that race, especially so as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or races. (OED)*

“Power exists as long as the group stays together against the “others”... Exercising power over other people affects them, through action or inaction...whether or not those who exercise power are aware of the success or consequences of their practices and whether or not the other party is aware of the power being exercised over him or her.”

– **Professor Philomena Essed, sociologist.**

“Ignorance and prejudice are the handmaidens of propaganda. Our mission, therefore, is to confront ignorance with knowledge, bigotry with tolerance, and isolation with the outstretched hand of generosity. Racism can, will, and must be defeated.” - Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations.

What are your experiences of racism?

Themes: Culture clashes

Culture Clash: *A conflict arising from the interaction of people with different cultural values.*
(Collins English Dictionary)

Yalda experiences cultural clashes every day as part of her family life; at meal times, at school, in the workplace, in the company of her friends, in conversations she overhears between her mother and father.

Culture clashes can lead to intolerance, racism and become violent exchanges. Those in parts of the East and West of the planet view each other with mistrust and repeatedly collide. The West has a problematic relationship with the Arab Muslim world, and vice versa. The West's view of Islam is overly simplistic and both the West and the Arab and Muslim worlds demonstrate a misunderstanding of each other.

"Since 1967, the United States has played a major role in the Middle East. While aspects of its culture, values, and technology have been received positively there, US political and military involvement in such major conflicts as those in Iraq and Palestine have undermined its credibility and negated the good it did in helping resolve the conflicts in Kuwait, Bosnia, and Kosovo. That the East and the West often define or interpret economics and politics differently exacerbates the divide between the two worlds."

- Shafeeq N Ghabra (The Tension Between East and West).

What culture clashes have you experienced?

Storytelling and Inspiration

Storytelling pre-dates writing. Stories are universal. Stories have been recorded on cave walls, tree trunks, wood, ivory and via tattoos. The oldest-known literary work is the Epic of Gilgamesh, composed in Babylonia more than 3,000 years ago on 12 clay tablets.

We tell stories to help us understand each other. We tell stories to give an example of how or why we feel a particular way. Telling stories keep memories alive that might otherwise have faded.

Telling stories is a way of finding common ground and sharing experiences. It can feel very positive when someone has had a similar experience and we feel that they understand where we are coming from.

What stories do you have? How and why will other people relate to them? What is universal about your stories?

Stories end up having a life of their own. They are not necessarily a literal retelling of actual events. Those that share stories have artistic licence to be as creative as possible and use their imagination; stories can be embellished. Aspects of actual events can change, as can names, and moments can be made up, and made more dramatic. It is the story we remember not the actual event, although the spirit of the actual event that form the basis of the story should remain intact.

What would you change about your actual event in order to tell a story? Why are these changes important?

If you are writing for the stage and/or performance, consider who should be telling the story and why; how characters interact with the audience and how they introduce themselves; stage directions; other characters' dialogue; the use of costume and props; facial expressions; posture.

Other resources and further reading

The Tehran Bureau - an independent news organisation, hosted by the Guardian and available online at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/series/tehran-bureau>

Sex and Sexuality in Islam by Muslim Women's League (1995) available online at <http://www.mwlusa.org/topics/sexuality/sexuality.html>

Hijab: A woman's rite of passage in Iran. At nine, Iranian schoolgirls are handed a chador and ushered into public life... and its paradoxes (2013) available online at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2013/dec/19/iran-hijab-islamic-veil>

The Two Faces of Modernity in Iran (2014) available online at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/dec/09/sp-modernity-iran-after-revolution>

BBC Iran profile, available online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14541327>

The New York Times on Iran, available online at <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/iran/index.html>

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Navai, Ramita (2014) *City of Lies: Love, Sex, Death, and the Search for Truth in Tehran*.

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