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Halifax playwright stages *The Veil* before Iranian audience

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Halifax playwright Shahin Sayadi has premiered a play he wrote for Canadians about the Iranian experience in front of an Iranian audience in Tehran.

His work, *The Veil* — which played in Halifax, Toronto and will soon go on to Vancouver — just finished its run at the Fadjr International Theatre Festival in Tehran. The festival runs Jan. 21 to 30.

Sayadi, who is artistic director of OneLight Theatre in Halifax, admits he was nervous staging his work in front of friends and family in Tehran for the first time.

"I was worried," he told CBC's Q cultural affairs show. "All my friends, my sisters and brothers were there. I wanted my sister to enjoy it."

He need not have worried — the audiences were intrigued with seeing Canadians interpreting the life of an Iranian woman, especially with a Canadian woman, actress Nadiya Chettiar, playing the main character.



Nadiya Chettiar, left, as Young Khanoom and Genevieve Steele as Nezhat in Onelight Theatre's production of *The Veil*. They had to perform in chadors in Tehran. ((Scott Munn/OneLight Theatre))

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The story is about a Persian princess, Khanoom, who lives through two revolutions and is forced to flee her country and spend her life in exile, losing both her privileged lifestyle and her illusions. It is based on Masoud Behnoud's epic novel *Khanoom*.

For Canadian actress Genevieve Steele, who plays a secondary character, Nezhat, the reality that she was a non-Iranian playing a Persian in front of an audience of Iranians didn't sink in right away.

"How horrible does it sound that the realization of all those facts didn't quite hit me until I got on stage," she said in an interview from Shiraz.



From left, Genevieve Steele, Sarah Kitz, Nadiya Chettiar and Marty Burt in OneLight Theatre's *The Veil*. ((Scott Munn/OneLight Theatre))

"It became incredibly clear to me as I was standing in front of all those people. Oh my gosh, here we are wearing chador. In Canada, it was sort of interesting and novel that we were telling the story, but for them it was their story and how strange to see these Canadians telling it."

Only slight changes for Iranian audiences

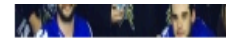
Steele was wearing chador, the traditional cloak that conceals Iranian women from shoulder to toe, because Iran demanded it. She wore it open at the front.

That was, in fact, the major change that Sayadi made for the Tehran festival.

"With the country's rules, women's hair and bodies have to be covered," he said.

The play touches on oil politics, domestic violence, homosexuality and both the Iran-Iraq war and the Iranian revolution, but Sayadi did not change his script for the Tehran presentation.

"As far as I know ... it is the first time something like this is going on ... It deals with all these issues, some of which are taboo, and also the political



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issues. The play starts in the middle of Iran-Iraq war. For all of that, we did the play," Sayadi said.

"The play was very well received," he said, obviously relieved. "I feel OK now from the responses we got from other critics and the audiences."

People wondered why it was in English and not in Farsi and pointed out cultural inaccuracies such as the way a certain character held a teacup, but their applause was warm and they were eager to meet the cast.

In fact, there seemed great enthusiasm for all the works in the festival, with theatres full to overflowing with culture-hungry Iranians.

The biggest surprise for Iranian-born Sayadi was the way audiences behave.








"They're very busy as an audience. They check their text messages; they talk," he said. "But they do that in every show. I warned Genevieve, so she wouldn't be surprised."

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