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Montague and Capulet as Shiite and Sunni

By TIM ARANGO

BAGHDAD — It is not poison or a dagger that takes the lives of the young lovers, but a suicide bomb. The Montagues and Capulets are divided not just by family, but also by religious sect. And the dialogue in the Iraqi adaptation of “Romeo and Juliet” is sprinkled with references to Blackwater, Iranians and the American reconstruction effort.

After a recent performance here at the National Theater, where the dramatic arts were once degraded to serve as a dictator’s propaganda, the audience filed out buzzing over the return of serious art to the Iraqi capital. Cloaked as a Shakespearean classic was a lively rendering of their own lives over the past nine years.

“It was about our reality, the killing that happened between the Sunnis and Shias,” said Senan Saadi, a university student who was in the audience.

The killing, of course, still happens. The morning after the show, explosions were heard in Baghdad. By the end of the day, a string of attacks around the country had left nearly three dozen people dead. By then, the cast of the play, including veteran Iraqi actors and young up-and-comers, was preparing to leave for the World Shakespeare Festival in Stratford-upon-Avon, William Shakespeare’s birthplace.

“Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad” opened Thursday at the festival and runs for 10 days as part of the cultural program linked with the coming London Olympics. Its story line of a doomed cross-sectarian love affair manages to touch on nearly every element of the recent collective Iraqi experience.

That it garnered many laughs — especially over the buffoonish Qaeda character in an explosives-laden vest, who is Paris, Juliet’s failed suitor, in Shakespeare’s original — and plenty of tears, too, is perhaps a small sign that Iraqi society is beginning to reconcile with the trauma of the war.

“Romeo, he doesn’t see Juliet for nine years,” explained Monadhil Daood, a famous Iraqi actor and playwright who is directing the play and spent two years writing the script. “At their first meeting they talk about the conflict between Sunni and Shia.”

The words Sunni and Shia are not mentioned explicitly, but are symbolized in ways that are clearly recognizable to an Iraqi audience. Capulet, Juliet’s father, is denoted as a Sunni by his red-and-white checkered keffiyeh (not to mention that a Qaeda fighter seeks to marry his daughter). Romeo’s father, Montague, wears a black-and-white scarf more commonly worn by Shiites.

“My message is that love is better than the conflict between the families,” Mr. Daood said.

Knit throughout are the little details of life in Iraq. An American general makes a cameo. Staccato machine-gun fire provides background noise. When the sexual imagery from the Queen Mab speech by Mercutio in Shakespeare’s original was deemed too risqué for the conservative audience, it was scrapped for an Iraqi folk story about a beetle looking for a husband.

Performances of Shakespeare plays were sometimes performed under Saddam Hussein’s government.

“You could always get the classics past censors,” said Deborah Shaw, the director of the Shakespeare festival in England and Mr. Daood’s wife. Ms. Shaw explained that dictators often allowed Shakespeare plays because, she said, “they are about legitimacy of power, how we should live together, justice.”

Arab dictators also sometimes gravitated to Shakespeare’s works because they could appropriate them for anti-Semitic purposes. For instance, “The Merchant of Venice,” with its Jewish villain, was a staple of school curriculums under Mr. Hussein, she said.

For Ms. Shaw, who described her role in the production as being “the first eyes of the Western audience,” the play raised a question about Iraq that has surely crossed the minds of many Iraqi women.

“Where are the Romeos?” she said. “We’ve had enough of gun-toting, dim young men.”

There are links in the production’s ensemble to Iraq’s cultured past and a theater scene that blossomed beginning in the 1950s after achieving independence from Britain. That past was gradually wiped out by decades of war, sanctions and the Hussein government’s intolerance for freedom of expression.

Mr. Daood, the director, is 52 and left Iraq in the 1980s after producing a play about the Iran-Iraq war that angered the government. “Saddam Hussein didn’t like it,” he said. “It was very dangerous for me.” He fled, and for years lived the peripatetic life of an exiled artist, flitting among Stockholm, London and Damascus, Syria. He has studied in Russia, and produced shows at the Kennedy Center in Washington and the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Sami Abdul Hamid, 82, plays a history teacher who represents the secular ideas that were overpowered here by religiosity and extremism. He is quite famous here, and in 1965 directed an Iraqi version of “The Merchant of Venice” in Baghdad.

An effort to reclaim the old tradition for a new generation of artists lies in the performances of the young actors appearing as Romeo and Juliet.

“It’s a portrayal of the Iraqi reality and a message to the world,” said Ahmed Moneka, 24, who plays Romeo. “It’s written in a way that has touched the root of the Iraqi reality.”

Speaking of the cast, he said: “We’ve all been through such things. We’ve all been through these crises and sectarian conflicts. There is a lot of ignorance here.”

Sarwa Malik, 23, plays Juliet, who is a Sunni. Ms. Malik is Shiite and Kurdish, and drew on her own experience of forbidden, cross-sectarian love in playing her character. Three years ago, while in college, she fell in love with a young Sunni man. The relationship was even more complicated because she came from money and he did not. They would meet in out-of-the-way spots on campus and write each other letters.

“My family was always saying, ‘Don’t be with this guy,’ ” she recalled.

Today they are married.

“There are a lot of men and women, girls and boys, who were in love and were unable to be together,” she said. “I was one of these cases. If they are really in love, they have to break these barriers.”

Yasir Ghazi, Duraid Adnan and Zaid Thaker contributed reporting.