The Road to Karbala

Travis Preston

Ed. note: Readers should refer back to the Critical Act by Una Chaudhuri that precedes this article. Chaudhuri's "Regime Change" is an account of the CalArts King Lear *directed by Travis Preston, which, as Preston explains below, was influenced by his trip to Karbala.*

> *A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.*
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> — *Walter Benjamin (1969:257–58)*

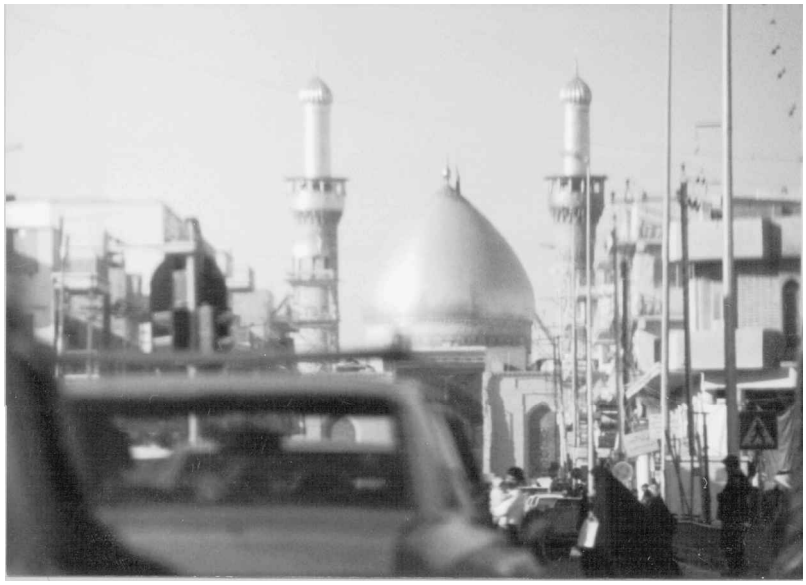
I was in the midst of the workshop process for *King Lear* (Center for New Theater at CalArts, Los Angeles, 2002). It was 1999 and we were about to approach the catastrophic dénouement of the fifth movement. As I drove to rehearsal a piece of Arabic music came over the radio. It incited a reverie that brought back events that had occurred some 10 years earlier. The 5 Freeway receded into the background as I became immersed in the memory: I had directed a film version of *Crime and Punishment* called *Astonished*. After taking the film to the large European and American festivals, I was invited to present the work in some extraordinary places. One of these was the First International Festival of Film and Television in Baghdad.

It was the last days of the Iran-Iraq war, the time known as the War of the Cities, which signified the random launching of missiles into Tehran and Baghdad to terrorize and demoralize the civilian populations. At this time the United States was supporting the government of Saddam Hussein in his struggle against the radical Shiite forces of the Ayatollah Khomeni. My invitation to the Festival was no doubt a gesture by the Iraqis toward a new, albeit suspiciously regarded, ally.

I was flown with six other people on an Iraqi Airline 747 from Frankfurt to Baghdad. The surreal nature of this journey was foreshadowed by the eerie isolation of these few passengers within the vast interior of this gigantic jet. Ours was the only plane arriving that night at Saddam International Airport. We were quickly escorted to a hotel surrounded by a huge wall rimmed with anti-aircraft positions.

The opening ceremony of the Festival was preparation for all that was to follow. In the midst of a militaristic choreography with children and little missiles, a man looking a great deal like Saddam interrupted the program, running

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1. The road leading to the mosque of Imam Hussein in Karbala, Iraq. (Photo by Travis Preston)

onto the stage screaming: "In honor of the First International Film Festival in Baghdad we have sent six missiles into Tehran! While we celebrate—Khomeni lies in the rubble!" As my taxi turned onto the main road leading back to the hotel six explosions rocked the city—Tehran's response was swift and commensurate. It was as though they were talking to each other in a very special and exotic language.

My hosts offered me any experience I desired except for the one that I truly wanted: a journey to the city of Karbala, burial place of Imam Hussein and the holiest site of Shiia Islam. I knew the complications of such a request. Though Karbala is a place one could theoretically visit, the tensions between Saddam and the Shiia sect within his own country were so extreme that the government feared they could not guarantee my safety. Indeed, Baghdad was surrounded by a roadblock whose principal objective was to keep out Shiia terrorists aligned with the Ayatollah Khomeni. The previous day 50 women waiting for a bus had been killed by a suicide bomber who failed in an attempt on the television station across from my hotel.

In preparation for my trip to Iraq I became enthralled by the traditions and practice of Shiia Islam. The importance and centrality of martyrdom fascinated me—as did the history and significance of Karbala as a center of Islamic thought and learning. Shiia Muslims believe burial in Karbala is a certain means of reaching Paradise. It is therefore a city of vast cemeteries. A Shiia martyr has the right to be buried in Karbala. Saddam Hussein identified any Iraqi soldier of the Shiia sect who died in the fight against Iran as a martyr by definition. Millions died in that war and the cemeteries in Karbala grew exponentially.

I searched the Baghdad bus station for a taxi that would drive me to Karbala. Rejection after rejection led to a wonderful spirit in his 40s who would hazard the trip. As we approached the roadblock enforced by a formidable troop of the Iraqi army, I was sure that we would be turned back. Commanded to stop, our driver reached into the glove compartment, took out and put on an army hat, and also pulled out military identification papers. After a few questions we were allowed to proceed. Our driver had fought on the Iranian front and had

sufficient credibility to get us through. Moreover, the border guards had seen my picture on the front page of the Baghdad newspapers. Westerners were rare enough in this time and we were clearly official guests of the government. The soldiers pointed at my picture and laughed.

I had a very strange feeling as I went through that checkpoint, the vast Iraqi desert in front of me. It was the feeling of leaving rational controls, however cruel or repressive. That ring around Baghdad was for me the border between modernity and magic. I was leaving the known universe and its rules.

Driving through the desert, my driver told me stories of the war. He wept at one moment as he described his encounter with the armies of young people—children really—who were used in advance of Iranian tanks to clear the minefields. Armed with the key to heaven and told that they were invisible, they were enjoined to march to the holy city of Karbala—to reclaim it from the secular infidels. He described them as sleepwalkers wandering through the desert night and walking calmly to their deaths. I was very moved by his description of the survivors—the ones who managed to get to Iraqi lines without detonating the mines—as they realized that they could be seen by the Iraqi enemy. I could think of no crueler awakening.

All the while the oil fields sped by, shielded by massive camouflage tents. Kilometer after kilometer of hidden wealth lay beneath this ancient wasteland—fueling the modern world and its wars.

The need for water forced us to stop at a small village on the road to Karbala. While seated briefly at a roadside stand, we witnessed one car after another pass by with coffins draped in the Iraqi flag. The staggering cost of war was manifest on the tops of these many cars as they made their way to Karbala—each dead passenger seeking the right to be buried as a martyr, each trusting that their families would not fail them in their quest for Paradise. Hundreds of these coffins went by us that day, in a span of time that seemed like mere moments. The dead being conveyed to burial populated the road to Karbala.

Karbala in this time was the site of untold suffering. It was a city of funerals and ecstatic mourning: processions moving through the streets, crowds of mourners wailing their pain to the heavens, and coffins everywhere. I shall not describe all of what I saw that day in Karbala; there are things that should be forbidden. I will say, however, that Karbala was a city of the dead and has always defined for me the psychological landscape of war.

I was quickly brought back to the present when I nearly plowed into cars that were stopping abruptly on the 5 Freeway. Slowed to a crawl, I finally saw what had caused the traffic to stop: two blazing automobiles had just crashed together with horrifying force. In that moment and in the context of my memory of Karbala, I had the uneasy feeling that I was seeing the future. For the first time in my career, I was late to rehearsal.

These images and these sounds haunted me as I created the final movement of *Lear.* Indeed, it is arguable that my entire relationship to this great work of Shakespeare emerged from that journey on the road to Karbala. Sadly, the images and sounds of that fiery crash have acquired a renewed significance in light of current events, events that have made our performances in Dijon critically important to us.

Reference

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Travis Preston *is Artistic Director of the Center for New Theater at CalArts, the professional producing arm of the CalArts School of Theater. He has directed theatre and opera throughout the world. Recent projects include controversial productions of Luigi Nono's* Al Gran Sole Carcio d'Amore *and* Boris Godounov*—both at the Hamburg State Opera. He is currently preparing* Hysteria II*, a performance based on the work of Jean-Martin Charcot, to premiere at the Théatre de la Bastille in Paris in 2005. Together with Harry Belafonte he is creating* The Long Road to Freedom*, a history of African American music to be performed at Carnegie Hall.*

A Pilgrim's Progress through the *Angel Project*

James Westcott

"*Angel Project*?"
"Yes."
"Get in."
The car bowled gently down the empty road and we were silent for a few strange seconds.
"I've never been to Roosevelt Island," I said.
"This is exactly the spot where everybody tells me that," the driver said.

Deborah Warner, the English director revered for her salvation of the hitherto hopelessly violent *Titus Andronicus* (1987), hounded by the Beckett estate for her unorthodox production of *Footfalls* (1994), and adored by New Yorkers for her *Medea* (2000), has a reputation for taking the audience to unexpected places.

"Where are we going?"
"Not far."

The car deposited me on the southern tip of Roosevelt Island near a crumbling gothic castle suffocated by ivy; it could have been Miss Havisham's house but was in fact a smallpox hospital. This is where the *Angel Project*, the centerpiece of Lincoln Center Festival 2003, began. It was a suitably ghostly and serene beginning, just a tiny sidestep from normal New York life but one that took the audience into an unfamiliar, plaintive parallel city.

Warner has done something like this before, in a derelict hotel in London in 1999 and in various buildings in Perth, Australia, a year later. Audience members become participants in a performance that uses all the city as a stage. Warner sketches a trail between abandoned buildings and intervenes in those empty, yet pregnant spaces to suggest a recent angelic presence. Occasionally visitors may encounter an angel directly. There were reports from Perth of solitary pilgrims taking 12 hours to complete the trail; along the way they were apparently provoked to contemplate their own divinity—or otherwise—and the fallen state of the city.

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