

Dress for Mona, A: Abridged one-act version

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CASTING REQUIREMENTS: 2f; 2m

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Introduction

The following one-act play is a shortened version of the full length play called, "A Dress for Mona." This is a play based on the life of a young Baha'i woman named Mona Mahmudnizhad, who was the youngest of ten women executed in Shiraz, Iran on the 18th of June, 1983 for their unwillingness to renounce their Bahá'í belief.

Our story begins before Mona went to prison. One night, she had a dream in which she was offered a gift from God. She was offered three dresses and she had to choose one. The first dress was red and it stood for martyrdom. The second was black and it stood for a life of suffering and sadness. The last was blue and it stood for a life dedicated to service.

SCENE

1 - Mona's Dream

Music. Mona enters. As she approaches center stage, a robed figure is illuminated.

A VOICE

A gift.

TWO VOICES

From.

ALL

God.

[Silence. The robed figure gestures right. A red dress is revealed. Mona takes the dress and holds it up to herself.]

MONA

No!

[She pushes the dress away. The robed figure gestures left. A black dress is revealed. Mona again holds the dress up to herself.]

MONA

No! No! I don't want that either.

[Again, she pushes the dress away. The robed figure comes forward and reveals a blue dress. Mona slowly takes it and holds it up to herself. The figure whispers in Mona's ear.]

MONA

Yes. This is the dress I choose.

[The robed figure removes his hood, unveiling a handsome young man. Mona is captivated. As he speaks he eventually moves back behind the frame.]

MONA

Who are you?

YOUNG MAN

Look for me.

MONA

What?

YOUNG MAN

I am there when you look for me.

MONA

When I...? What do you...?

YOUNG MAN

In the face of others--

MONA

What do you mean?

YOUNG MAN

Look for me.

MONA

I don't know what you mean.

YOUNG MAN

Look for me.

MONA

Who are you?

[A voice is heard, calling to her. This time from the waking world. It is Mr. Alizadeh, her English teacher.]

ALIZADEH

Mahmudnizhad.

YOUNG MAN

I am.

ALIZADEH

Miss Mahmudnizhad. Please, take your seat.

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SCENE

2 - English Class

[The young man pulls the hood back over his head and exits into the dark with the dress as the scene shifts to the English class. Mona sits. Mr. Alizadeh points to a board with an English phrase written on it.]

MR.

ALIZADEH

And again...

THE CLASS

"I would like to buy a kidney pie for my wife."

MR.

ALIZADEH (To audience.)

Everyone, please. Yes, you too.

THE

“CLASS”

"I would like to buy a
kidney pie for my wife."

MR.

ALIZADEH

Not "vife"!

Wa-wa-wa. Wwwwwwife! Speak it like an
Arab!

THE CLASS

"I would like to buy a
kidney pie for my wife."

MR.

ALIZADEH

Now what about this word
ordering? Does someone have it? Yes, Miss Mahmudnizhad.

MONA

The subject comes first.

MR.

ALIZADEH

And what is that subject...

Yes? The subject is "I." Now, class, is it necessary to include the
word "I"?

THE CLASS

Yeeeeesss.

MR.

ALIZADEH

Are you sure? Class, is it not
like Persian where you can just add the pronoun if you feel like it?

THE CLASS

Nnnoooo.

MR.

ALIZADEH

The English are very impatient, you know. They don't want to wait til the end of the sentence before they figure out who's doing what. The subject is first. Miss Mahmudnizhad, please continue, what is next?

MONA

Next comes the verb.

MR.

ALIZADEH

The verb comes next! Exactly, those English are so impatient they need to know right away what's happening and who's doing it. Where's the poetry in that, I ask you?! Huh? Huh? Persian, you see, is a circle. You need the whole of it to understand any of it, but the English, the English are in such a hurry, they hear the headline, the "who" and the "what" and, bam, they're off to colonize another part of the world, and you're not even finished with your sentence! (Mona raises her hand.) Yes, Miss Mahmudnizhad.

MONA

Then why teach?

MR.

ALIZADEH

Excuse me?

MONA

Why teach English? Why teach something that you don't care about?

[Pause. A voice comes over the intercom speaker.]

INTERCOM

Mr. Alizadeh?

MR.
ALIZADEH

(Shouting
at the intercom speaker.)

What do you want, disembodied
voice?!

INTERCOM

Mr. Alizadeh, please come down to
the main office.

MR.
ALIZADEH

Disembodied voice! I finally get
a student to ask a question and you interrupt!

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SCENE
3 - A Mosque & Mona's room

Mona returns center stage.
She picks up the blue dress and stands as if assessing the fit of the
dress in a mirror. After a moment, she
closes her eyes, breathing deeply. Mr.
Alizadeh reenters.

MR.
ALIZADEH

We have a visitor. The Religious Magistrate of the
Revolutionary Court. Please welcome
Ayatu'llah Qazá'í.

[He steps aside. The doors to the back of the house
fly
open. The RELIGIOUS MAGISTRATE

enters. He is played by the same actor that portrays the Young Man in Mona's dream, but now wears a beard and a large turban. He walks straight towards Mona, who has opened her eyes with a start. They are locked in a stare as he comes closer. He walks until he is just opposite her. He puts on a pair of eyeglasses, and her stare is broken as if the vision of him has vanished. She breaks away. He turns.]

MAGISTRATE

Let us talk about "Bahá'í." (Pause.) Bahá'í says it is a religion. Islam says Baha'i is a political sect. The Twelfth Imam has returned, Bahá'í says. My friends, if the Twelfth Imam had returned, I should not be standing here. He should be here, and I should be on the floor in humility like you. But here I am, and I ask: Where is Imam? (A beat.) But wait, you may say. Baha'is aren't so bad, you may say. You see them around. They seem nice, you say. Before you know it, you're seeking them out. Meeting them in back alleys, and they begin to fill you up with their poison! Filling your cup! The poison is sweet, they say! Drink it down, my friends, BUT KNOW!!! God reads your heart, even as I read this Qur'an! (With a thick guttural Arabic pronunciation) "Házá va enna letagheyna lashara ma'ábe, Jahannama yaslavanahá fabe'ass-al Mehádo!" [1] This is what God has revealed! This plague will be eradicated from this land. Starting now. And you will do it.

[During the Magistrate's speech, Mona, now wearing the dress, has returned to stand center stage. He turns and prostrates himself. Mona addresses herself in the mirror, practicing her delivery.]

MONA

My name is Mona. I was asked to come and act as your teacher. I've never done this before so... maybe we can start by getting to know each other better.

[The Magistrate rises and walks to Mona. She puts on a dark

chador.]

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SCENE

4 - Prison

Mona kneels. She sways a bit, eyes closed, apparently praying. We hear a voice from offstage.

WOMAN'S
VOICE (Off.)

Mona!

[Mona
opens her eyes.]

MONA

I'll be right in, Zahra.

WOMAN

Mona, look! Look!

[The
woman, Zahra, has entered and handed Mona a piece of paper.]

MONA

Is this real? I mean... a
release? (A beat.) But, no. No.
I want everyone to be released.
I don't want to be the only one.
It's horrible. How can I sleep
in my bed when you are all here in the cold?

ZAHRA

We're not going to think about
that, Mona.

MONA

I feel torn.

ZAHRA

But don't you want to go home?

MONA

Want, want, who cares what I want? No, no, no, Zahra. This is not the way Baha'is think about it. We are here for God! We are in prison for our faith! What I want is what God wants for me! That's what I want. That's what we all want. That's why we're here. That's why when they line us up and give us the choice... that's why we always come back here. Because that's what we want. We want what God wants. (Pause.) It's just hard sometimes to figure out what God actually wants.

[A long beat. She tears up the paper, then exits.]

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SCENE

5 - Interrogation Room

Mr. Alizadeh enters. He takes a moment to look around, then sits. Mona enters.

MONA (Surprised.)

Oh...

ALIZADEH

Miss Mahmudnizhad.

MONA

Mister Alizadeh, Hi! What...?

ALIZADEH

It's good to see you again.

MONA

It's good to see you! What are you doing here? I... I wasn't... This isn't how we normally meet with visitors.

ALIZADEH

Miss Mahmudnizhad, I am here to discuss with you your options.

[A
beat.]

MONA

My options?

ALIZADEH

Yes. I have just spoken with the authorities here and...

MONA

I'm not going to be released.

ALIZADEH

Well, no, not yet... no. But it is within your power to negotiate your freedom.

MONA

Mr. Alizadeh, I don't know if you know this but the only way they'll release us is if we claim to not be Baha'is.

ALIZADEH

(Gravely.)

Yes.

MONA

So I really don't have any other options.

ALIZADEH

Miss Mahmudnizhad, I am ashamed. I am ashamed to find you here. I am ashamed that Iran has fallen so low that it casts its innocent children into prison.

MONA

You don't have to be ashamed. I'm not.

ALIZADEH

You should be free! You should be in school, learning! How can they do this? It was one thing to hear about it, but now to see you... No I cannot allow this. I cannot.

MONA

Mr. Alizadeh. I'm in prison because of my beliefs. There is no shame in that.

ALIZADEH

No this is unacceptable. Unacceptable!

MONA

I appreciate that, Mr. Alizadeh. I do. But there's nothing you can do. We have to leave this in God's hands.

ALIZADEH

Is that how you really feel?

MONA

Yes. I'm content.

ALIZADEH

Really?

MONA

Really. There's nothing you can do.

ALIZADEH

Nothing? Before I was brought to this room, Aqa-ye-Husayni told me there were several women here in prison that were about to be convicted of capital crimes.

I asked if my student was one of them.

He said, yes. And then he asked me -- me -- to help him.

MONA

To do what? Convince me to recant?

ALIZADEH

Clarify your options.

MONA

Mr. Alizadeh, I'm grateful that you've come to see me. I am. But if you've only come to convince me to renounce my religion...

ALIZADEH

Are you afraid I might succeed?

MONA

I'm afraid of nothing.

ALIZADEH

Nothing? Nothing, Mahmudnizhad?

What if they torture you? What if they torture someone you love? You're not the only one you have to think about.

MONA

Mr. Alizadeh...

ALIZADEH

Are you afraid of truth,
Mahmudnizhad?

[Pause.]

MONA

No. I'm not.

ALIZADEH

Then you can listen to this old
bachelor foreign-language teacher whose only wish is to see his students grow
and flourish?

MONA

Of course.

ALIZADEH

Thank you. (A beat.) You know, you're just like him.

MONA

What?

ALIZADEH

Your father. You have your father's faith.

MONA

I follow the same religion as my
father, Mr. Alizadeh. My faith is my
own.

ALIZADEH

Miss

Mahmudnizhad, I am not here to convert you.

I'm only here to talk to you about your options. I do not like the clergy.
But, Miss Mahmudnizhad, I can ALIZADEH
(cont'd)

find nothing of any worth in you
dying for a belief.

MONA

I understand why you might feel
that way, but you are not a Bahá'í.

ALIZADEH

I know something about your
religion, Miss Mahmudnizhad.

MONA

You are a Muslim, Mister
Alizadeh?

ALIZADEH

I was born a Muslim.

MONA

Did Imam Husayn do well in dying
for his faith?

ALIZADEH

My dear, you are not Imam
Husayn. Your story will not be
told. Mourners will not pour onto the
streets for you. They will not put up a
wailing every year to remember your sacrifice.
Too many people have already died for causes. We don't have room for you on
our calendar.

MONA

I'm not doing this to be
remembered by your calendar. I'm doing
this for God.

ALIZADEH

Yes, I know. I know something about your religion. Some very good people, and they say some good things about education...

MONA

Men and women.

ALIZADEH

Most admirable. But, Miss Mahmudnizhad, the goal of education is to make this a better world, and yet you seem all too ready to give it all up for some other world. Doesn't this seem to be a contradiction?

MONA

No, it's...

ALIZADEH

It sounds like fundamentalism.

MONA

Am I killing myself? If it were up to me, I'd be back in school...

ALIZADEH

But it is up to you!

MONA

How?

ALIZADEH

Just tell them what they want to hear and you're free to go.

MONA

Mr. Alizadeh, you care about truth?

ALIZADEH

Truth? What is truth? The truth is uncertain. Even within Islam, there are different opinions about what truth is.

MONA

You stood up for me when the clergy was trying to empty the school of Bahá'ís.

ALIZADEH

Yes.

MONA

Why did you do that?

ALIZADEH

Because I wanted to see you thrive and flourish, and live.

MONA

Wouldn't it have just been easier to allow them to expel me?

ALIZADEH

Easier? ... No. I couldn't have lived with myself.

MONA

Exactly. And I couldn't live with myself if I were to recant.

ALIZADEH

But there is a difference between me putting up with some heat from the clergy and you throwing away your life.

MONA

How do you know they can't burn your house down?

ALIZADEH

I live in an apartment.

MONA

No free thinker is safe in this society, Mr. Alizadeh. Didn't you say that?

ALIZADEH

That doesn't mean we throw ourselves into the fire.

MONA

Do you think you're the only one who should sacrifice?

ALIZADEH

That's absurd. I love what I do. I have sacrificed nothing.

MONA

So if I told you I love my Faith more than anything else?

ALIZADEH

I'd say you're a fool to throw away your life for words.

MONA

Words?

ALIZADEH

Words! That's all they are! Like words in a book. Close the book and they are gone!

MONA

This book is my life, Mr. Alizadeh!

ALIZADEH

Precisely. (A beat.) Your faith advocates moderation in all things.

MONA

It also demands absolute truthfulness.

ALIZADEH

And yet 'Abdu'l-Bahá said you could lie to a dying man if it would comfort his mind. How do you explain that contradiction?

MONA

'Abdu'l-Bahá said that?

ALIZADEH

I know something about your Faith, Miss Mahmudnizhad.

MONA

Where did he say that?

ALIZADEH

Some Answered Questions. Chapter 57. Verse 12.

MONA

I need to check that. But even then, that doesn't mean I shouldn't tell the truth about my belief.

ALIZADEH

What is the truth, Miss Mahmudnizhad? Show me an absolute statement about any subject in your writings, and I will show you another to contradict it.

MONA

I don't believe you.

ALIZADEH

Try me.

MONA

I don't believe you.

ALIZADEH

I'll prove it to you. Try me.

MONA

Okay, in the Bahá'í writings it says that we should investigate the truth for ourselves and that we should ask questions.

ALIZADEH

Bahá'u'lláh: "The most burning fire is to question the signs of God." Words of Wisdom. Verse 18.

MONA

I don't see that as...

ALIZADEH

I know something about your faith.

MONA

But...

ALIZADEH

There are no absolutes.

MONA

Why are you saying this?

ALIZADEH

Because you are my student.

MONA

Baha'is don't dissemble their
faith.

ALIZADEH

Bahá'u'lláh says that Bahá'ís
should act with wisdom to avoid persecutions.

MONA

Bahá'ís don't dis-

ALIZADEH

But what about you, Mona? What
about Mona? What does Mona think about it? Investigate the truth for
yourself. You say you're not afraid,
but maybe you're just a little afraid to think for yourself?

MONA

No.

ALIZADEH

Not even a little? (Pause.)
You had a dream that you told me about.
With the dresses.

[Mona
looks down.]

ALIZADEH

You chose the blue one if I
recall correctly... but that doesn't seem right. The blue one was about life
and service if I remember
correctly... Am I wrong? You did believe that dream to contain a message, did
you not? Mona?

MONA

Yes.

ALIZADEH

So who was this message from?
From God? Because God also appears to be the one telling you to die for your
faith. Well, which is it? Life or
death? Or maybe God is confused?

MONA

How dare you say that?!

ALIZADEH

It was a question. Am I not allowed to ask questions?

MONA

God is not confused. You may be.
I may be. God is not confused.

ALIZADEH

But, you see, I don't think it
was God sending you that dream. I
think it was your own unconscious.
Maybe it sensed that your life was in danger, so it fashioned a creative
way of telling you...

MONA

No. It was more than that.

ALIZADEH

The other option is a confused
God. Are you ready to die for a
confused God?

MONA

Why are you doing this? I don't
know why you're doing this.

ALIZADEH

You are my student...

MONA (A
discovery.)

You were a Baha'i.

[A
beat.]

ALIZADEH

I was.

MONA

What happened?

ALIZADEH

I woke up.

[A
beat.]

MONA

Do you believe in God, Mr.
Alizadeh?

ALIZADEH

I cannot believe in a God at war
with Himself.

MONA

I'll be honest with you. I didn't expect to face this situation. I
didn't.

But I have not been abandoned.

I'm seeing things now... Life
and death. They don't mean the same
things any more. Everything around us
is telling us how fleeting this life is.

But God is present with us in this very moment, Mr. Alizadeh. Do you feel
Him? He doesn't speak through

human language, Mr. Alizadeh. He speaks
in the heart. And sometimes it takes
time to understand what He's saying.

ALIZADEH
(Harshly.)

What you're really talking about
is another father figure that you can cling to when your real father is dead.

MONA

I am not clinging to my father.

ALIZADEH

Then listen to what I'm saying
and stand on your own!

MONA (Standing,
trembling.)

I stand on my own. I have left the house of my father. My clothes are
packed. My rugs rolled up. And I'm on a journey. To
the abode of my lover.

ALIZADEH

Your...

MONA

I am a bride. And this is my wedding day. This is my wedding dress. The
dress I have chosen. The dress I have put on. And no one will take it off
me... until my
wedding night. And then only him.

ALIZADEH

What if someone kills him first?

MONA

What?

ALIZADEH

Your lover?

MONA

What are you...?

ALIZADEH

(Gesturing.)

What if someone holds him in front of you and -- with a word -- slits his throat? Because I can do that. With a word. I can kill with a word. (A beat.) Dead. He's dead. Your lover is dead. And you are alone in this world.

[A
beat.]

MONA

Mr. Alizadeh, I just saw someone die.

ALIZADEH

Yes.

MONA

Mr. Alizadeh, it was you.

[End
of scene.]

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SCENE

6 - Final Interrogation

The lights go off except for a single harsh light center stage. Mona comes forward to stand in the light. As she comes into it, she is overtaken by exhaustion.

MONA

How much longer are you going to keep me here? My legs are numb. (Her head falls. She starts.) No! Gotta stay... here. Okay. (She struggles to open her eyes.) What did you want? (She struggles.) I am still... I am still awake! (Her head falls.) Awake. (She walks around in a small circle, stomping, trying to stay conscious.) I'm awake!

[She falls asleep, standing. The Magistrate appears.]

MAGISTRATE

I came across an interesting thing. Under "desired profession", you have "service to humanity." It's a noble thing, Mona. May I call you Mona?

MONA

Yes, sir.

MAGISTRATE

Truly. A very noble thing.

MONA (Very softly.)

Thank you.

MAGISTRATE

You also have here that one of your role models in this respect is your father.

MONA

Yes, sir.

MAGISTRATE

He must be very proud. Your father has been of great service to us here. Reminding the Baha'is that they have nothing to hide. What about you,

Mona? Do you have something to hide?

MONA

No, sir.

MAGISTRATE

No doubts or fears, stray thoughts, questions why you're really here? (A beat.) Mona?

MONA

I have nothing to hide, your honor.

MAGISTRATE

Then tell me why you're here.

MONA

I served as a teacher for a Baha'i children's class.

[A
beat.]

MAGISTRATE

When God's revolution came to this country, we took away your ability to congregate. We dissolved your institutions. We closed the border to keep you from spreading. What is happening to your potential for service? We denied you rights of citizenship. We had you expelled from schools, fired from your jobs. Your homes were burnt, your leaders executed, your holy places destroyed. Do you see what is happening to your service? You come here, cut off from the world, you have nothing, you are completely at our disposal. Well then, you think, you can help the others in the cell with you. Now you can't go near them. You wanted to pray. I took the words right out of your mouth. (A beat.) Now you feel that breath surging in and out of your nostrils, Mona? Huh? You feel that hot, moist breath surging in and

out? Mona, I can take that away too.
How are you going to serve then, Mona, when Mona is no more?

[Mona
doesn't respond.]

MAGISTRATE

What do you say to that, my
child?

MONA

Then somehow, I will serve... in
death.

MAGISTRATE

Serve whom, Mona? Do you think
anyone will ever remember what happens to you here? (A beat.) Do you
think this is cruel? Do you? Can you forgive me? I love this country. I love
Iran. And I love all the people in it, though I send
every last one to the grave! I love them the way God loves them. With
justice. And justice, in our sight, is only mercy. Do you feel my love for you,
Mona? I am your real father, Mona. I am
telling you the truth, Mona. So will
you forgive me? Mona?

MONA

There's nothing to forgive. (A
beat.) You lead me to my Beloved.

MAGISTRATE

We must obey the Qur'an. Accept Islam or face execution.

MONA

I kiss the order of execution.

[Mona kisses the hand of the
Magistrate. She then looks into his
face. She lifts her hands and removes

his turban and his glasses to reveal the Young Man from her earlier visions.
His outer garment falls to the ground. He smiles as she stares at him.
After a moment, he moves behind her.]

YOUNG MAN

(Gently.)

Are you ready?

[Mona nods and takes a step
forward.]

MONA

Wait. (A beat.) Last.

I want to be last.

YOUNG MAN

Are you afraid?

MONA

No. I want to pray for the others.

YOUNG MAN

It is granted.

[Mona lowers her head in
silent prayer as the names of the Ten Women Martyrs of Shiraz are read
off. A carpet is spread out, and as the
names are read, people come out carrying, with great care, dresses representing
each woman.]

READER (Throughout.)

Shírín Dálvand. Táhirih Síyávushí. Roya Ishráqí. 'Izzat
Ishráqí. Zarrín Muqímí. Símin Sábírí. Nusrat Yaldá'í. Mahshíd
Nírúmand. Akhtar Sabet. Mona
Mahmúdnizhád.

[When Mona is called, she and
the young man together remove her chador, revealing the red dress beneath.
She shivers and moves forward. She lays down the veil.]

THE END

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[1] Qur'an 38:55-56 (Transliterated pronunciation) "This is so! And for the transgressors will be an evil return! Hell! Where they will burn, and worst is that place to rest!"

— Dress for Mona, A: Abridged one-act version (Used by permission of the curator)