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Staging Migration and Post-National Identities Swedish -Iranian Feminist Playwright and Director Farnaz Arbabi Visits UCLA

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**Author**

Lindqvist, Ursula

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**F**ARNAZ ARBABI makes it her business to defy expectations and to empower others to do the same. Born in Iran in 1977, she moved to Sweden with her parents at age 2. Now in her early 30s, she has become one of Sweden's most sought-after playwrights and directors, and she is also a frequent contributor to European debates on immigration, language and identity, sexuality, and the rights of women and children.

On November 18, Arbabi will visit UCLA and present her work in public lecture, "Staging Migration and Post-National Identities: The Performance of Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Swedish Theater," co-sponsored by the Center for the Study of Women. The lecture will take place from 4 to 5:30 pm in 314 Royce Hall on the UCLA campus, followed by a reception.

Arbabi's breakthrough play, *The Emigrants* (2006), produced by Sweden's national theater Riksteatern, as well as her direction of author Jonas Hassen Khemiri's debut play *Invasion!* (also in 2006), earned her the Swedish Theater Critics Prize as well as the daily newspaper Expressen's special theater prize, *A Piece of George's Hat*. Swedish Radio also named her Theater Personality of the Year for 2006. In 2007, she received the Vilhelm Moberg prize awarded by the Theater Guild.



## *Staging Migration and Post-National Identities*

SWEDISH-IRANIAN FEMINIST PLAYWRIGHT AND DIRECTOR FARNAZ ARBABI VISITS UCLA

*By Ursula Lindqvist*

In *The Emigrants*, a departure from her previous work in which she stages new plays on contemporary issues, Arbabi rewrote a literary classic: an immigrant trilogy that Swedish-American author Vilhelm Moberg published in the 1950s. Moberg's original chronicles the perilous journey of a group of Swedes who emigrate from the southern Swedish province of Småland in the mid-nineteenth century to settle in Minnesota. The main protagonists are Kristina and Karl-Oskar Nilsson, a farming couple struggling to feed their children in a Sweden ravaged by famine. Joining the Nilssons are Karl-Oskar's brother Robert and Robert's friend Arvid, who are escaping indentured servitude under an oppressive landowner; Daniel, an evangelical priest fleeing from religious persecution by the state-supported church, and his wife; and Ulrika and Elin, a born-again prostitute and her teenage daughter, who want to escape social ostracism.

They travel by boat to "the promised land" of America, and when they land, they are unable to speak the language or understand local customs. They journey on across the country by train and by foot, eventually settling in Minnesota. This epic tale, which accounts for why so many people of Swedish descent still populate the Midwestern United States (nearly a fifth of Sweden's population emigrated during its painful nineteenth century), first appeared as a

series of novels based on immigration records: *The Emigrants*, *The Immigrants*, *The New Land*, and *Last Letter to Sweden*. Moberg's novels were previously adapted to a 1971 film starring Liv Ullmann and Max von Sydow and directed by Jan Troell. ABBA collaborators Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus also adapted these stories into a popular 1996 musical titled "Kristina from Duvemåla."

Arbabi's version rewrites Moberg's epic tale so that today's Kristina and Karl-Oskar are emigrants from Bosnia who seek a better life for their children in Sweden. Their companions on this perilous journey are still Robert and Arvid, but in Arbabi's version they are runaways from an abusive Russian orphanage. Daniel is a devout Muslim who seeks religious freedom in a new country, and Ulrika and Elin, are now an Iranian prostitute and her teenage daughter who flee the judgment of conservative imams. The play's dialogue is in Farsi, Bosnian, Russian, Swedish, and English (with projected supertitles). In Arbabi's version of *The Emigrants*, modern-day Sweden has become the promised land that emigrants from poorer countries are fleeing to, rather than fleeing from.

In her public lecture, Arbabi will show clips from her rewriting and staging of this play, as well as several other productions she has directed. "Moberg's emigrants are viewed as heroes



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and pioneers, while today's immigrants (to Sweden) are treated as criminals and parasites," reads the play's synopsis on Sweden's national theater's website. "The play wants to create an identification with, and a subsequent understanding toward, people who make the same life-threatening journey today. They have, just like the Swedish emigrants, left their homes and their families and risked their own lives to cross vast seas and stretches of land so that their children can have a better life."

*The Emigrants* received excellent reviews when it opened in the fall of 2006, but not everyone was enthusiastic. For example, Arbabi received a letter from a retired woman, a member of Sweden's Social Democratic Party, who admonished Arbabi that she should *veta hut*, an untranslatable Swedish phrase that means roughly to know how to behave properly, and that "one just doesn't do that with literary classics. Besides, refugees aren't important" (*Dagens Nyheter*, 10 February 2006). "The point of doing *The Emigrants* is to get people to react, and if a letter comes from someone who doesn't agree with me at all, that means I'm on the right track," Arbabi said in a February 2006 interview with *Dagens Nyheter*, Sweden's largest daily newspaper. "It would be pointless if everyone agreed."

Arbabi has never been one to avoid controversial topics that she considers important. In 2002,

in the aftermath of the notorious "honor killing" of a young Kurdish Muslim immigrant woman, Fadime Sahindal, by her father, she co-authored with Lotta Fristorp *Survival Handbook for Girls about Freedom and Honor* (Save the Children, 2002). "We were angry. All the discussions were about the perpetrators, why they did this, what could have caused that," she said in the 2006 newspaper interview. "We didn't want to have that discussion but rather focus on the girls and allow them to take up space [in this debate]."

In 2003, Arbabi contributed an essay to an edited volume, *Play the Man-Migrant: A [m] anthology*, dedicated to men's sexuality. In 2007 she directed *Normal*, a devised work about sexuality among teenagers, at the recently founded Camp X Theater in Copenhagen, and in July 2008 her Swedish adaptation and direction of the cult musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, at the Stockholm City Theater, kicked off the EuroPride Festival.

Currently she is directing Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* at Backa Theater that she and collaborator Elmira Arikian have reworked into a version for young people. In Spring 2009, she will make her debut directing an opera with Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Consul*, a political thriller from 1950, at Folkoperan in Stockholm. She also serves on the Board of Artistic Directors for Theater Scenario in Stockholm.

"I want to do everything," Arbabi said in the 2006 newspaper interview. "I feel an enormous hunger toward the entire world. I want to do opera, musicals, film, dance, live out of the country, work with provincial theaters. It isn't my thing to work on this as just a 9-to-5 job. If I were forced to choose between directing something that I didn't think meant something, and working at Konsum (a Swedish grocery coop), I'd choose Konsum. "For me this has been a dream to get to do this, this incredibly long. So I must protect my desire so that it doesn't disappear."

**Ursula Lindqvist, Ph.D.**, is a Research Scholar at the UCLA Center for the Study of Women