SOFT REVOLUTION

by ANGELA BETZIEN

A response to:
Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah
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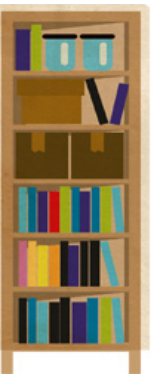

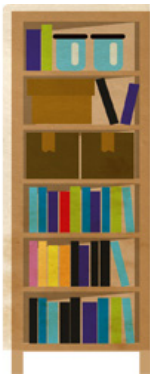

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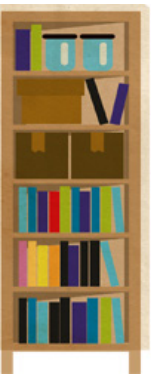

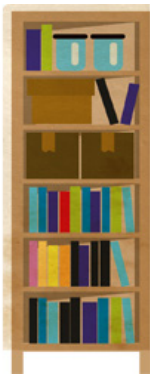

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Author's Biography

Photo by Jeremy Shaw

ANGELA BETZIEN is a multi-award winning writer and a founding member of independent theatre company Real TV; her work has toured widely across Australia and internationally. Angela was the 2014 Patrick White Fellow at Sydney Theatre Company and developed new plays for STC, while also working on plays for Melbourne Theatre Company and Belvoir in Australia.

Angela's play, *War Crimes* won the 2012 Kit Denton Disfellowship and the QLD Literary Award for Playwriting; and was nominated for a NSW Premier's Literary Award in 2012. Another play, *Children of the Black Skirt* toured Australian schools for three years and won the 2005 Drama Victoria Award for Best Performance by a Theatre Company for Secondary Schools. *Hoods* toured extensively throughout Australia and internationally to Cortile Theatre Im Hof, Italy and Dschungel Wien Theaterhaus, Austria in 2010.

Where in the World is Frank Sparrow? was commissioned by and premiered at Graffiti Theatre in Ireland in 2012 and had a return season in 2014.

Angela's play *The Girl Who Cried Wolf* was commissioned and produced by Sydney Opera House:Ed and Arena Theatre and appeared at the ASSITEJ world congress for children's theatre.

In 2013 Angela was a member of the Griffin Studio at the Griffin Theatre Company in Sydney. Her upcoming work, *Mortido*, will have its premiere at Belvoir in 2015 and will be published by Currency Press.

SOFT REVOLUTION

In October last year Gough Whitlam died. At his memorial Cate Blanchett eloquently reminded us of the legacy of the Whitlam Government, which dramatically altered the cultural conversation in Australia. That legacy encompassed the end of the White Australia policy and the introduction of an official policy for multiculturalism to encourage the notion that cultural differences within society should be 'accepted and celebrated'.

Elected on a groundswell of change built by the radical social movements of the '60s and early '70s, the Whitlam Government was the graduation of our nation from infancy to adolescence. This period of maturation showed promising signs of acknowledging the atrocities of our past and engaging with the potential of a culturally diverse and global future. I imagine it was a thrilling time to be an Australian. At last, some progress!

Yet in the weeks that I've been writing this I have watched with a sinking heart as ignorance and xenophobia rear their ugly heads once again on our streets, in our press and out of the mouths of our politicians.

In November 2014, for instance, Coalition backbencher George Christensen, who pushed for a ban on the burqa, attacked Halal-certified foods, claiming the proceeds sponsor terrorism. Only months earlier the Prime Minister dismissed the oldest living culture on earth, describing this country prior to colonisation as 'nothing but bush'.

So fresh in his grave, Gough must be turning and turning and turning.

Since September 11, 2001 every day seems like groundhog day. It's enough to make a person catatonic with rage, silent with incredulity, numb with injustice.

Alana Valentine however, is far from silent. Rather, she is one of the most prolific, politically potent and principled writers of her

generation. And perhaps more than most playwrights she understands the revolutionary capacity of theatre within community. Whether she's telling a story about the epic struggles of the NRL (*Run Rabbit Run*), the brutal treatment of young women in institutions (*Parramatta Girls*) or the lives of children with parents in prison (*Comin' Home Soon*) Valentine skilfully knits her narratives with heart, hope and humour.

Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah is no exception. The play was first performed in 2007, commissioned by the Alex Buzo Company in response to Buzo's *Norm and Ahmed*, an ugly, uncompromising picture of Australia that exposed the nasty prejudices hidden beneath ocker joviality. Written four years before the Whitlam victory, *Norm and Ahmed* spoke to the racism and generational antagonism in Australian society at the time.

While mirroring several of the themes and motifs in Buzo's seminal text, Valentine's play is a story of two generations of Afghani-Australian women. Shafana is a young biology student. Her aunt Sarrinah, a Doctor of Engineering. The family were forced to flee war-torn Kabul and, via India, establish new lives in Australia. When Shafana undertakes an elective in comparative religion she returns to the primary source of her faith, the Qur'an, and she is overwhelmed. Shafana attempts to explain her epiphany to her aunt, 'For me it was as if a switch had been lit and light came in, illuminating my world' (pg. 18).

The events of September 11, 2001 have shaped Shafana's understanding of the world and her relationship to her faith. While her aunt has chosen to reject the hijab, Shafana wants to wear it as a sign of her spiritual awakening. In an appeal for her blessing, Shafana reveals her decision to her much-loved and admired aunt. Her aunt's response is shattering. By the end of the play, Sarrinah has drawn a line in the sand. She tells Shafana, 'You are my opponent now' (pg. 42).

In *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah,* Valentine asks a potent question: What do you do when you profoundly disagree with someone you love? Surely this question is the premise of some of the greatest drama of our times. Drama is, after all, the space where the personal and the

political collide. It is the nexus where a thesis becomes embodied, where characters through their actions play out the pros and cons, where they inhabit the black, white and grey areas of our lives. If the heart is not entwined in the argument, then the audience might as well read an essay. A play cannot be pure polemic. If it is, an audience will switch off and start to think about sex or the laundry. Playwrights bring flesh and blood to the argument and if they're good, they do it with an invisible touch. And this is what makes Alana Valentine such a skilful playwright, her invisibility.

Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah is a work of fiction, one based on extensive interviews with Muslim women. It is a narrative that has emerged from Valentine's immersion in that community, from a process of asking open questions and listening carefully for complexity and contradiction. In her *Not in Print* interview with Currency Press, Alana cites a comment made by one woman that the strongest opponents to putting on the hijab were her aunts. As a playwright I can imagine this was a eureka moment for Valentine, one that sparked the central dramatic question of the play, which, beyond issues of race and religion taps universal themes of generational revolution.

And while *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* does succeed in resonating universally, beyond the here and now, I am compelled to discuss it within its current context, a context which has been on loop since the days of Buzo.

In the last decade there has been much debate regarding our failure to reflect on our stages the faces on our streets, a fact which fails to inspire a new generation of culturally diverse writers to claim cultural space. It becomes a perpetual cycle. As performer and theatre maker Candy Bowers wrote in her essay, *All of Me: The Tale of a Brown Girl with Big Dreams*, 'the roles written for people of colour to play on the Australian stage have an impact on our lives, our culture, on our identity and on young audiences'.[1] *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* is unique in its portrayal of Muslim identity. The characters are a rare gift for two female actors from culturally diverse backgrounds.

In many ways I'm quite like Alana Valentine. To begin, we are both white, women writers. As playwrights we tend to gravitate towards challenging themes and issues. Indeed several of the issues in *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* are mirrored in my play *War Crimes*, a story about racism and identity in rural Australia. While *War Crimes* is a work of fiction, the play was inspired by several real events including the Cronulla race riots of 2005 and an incident in a Melbourne high school in which an Iraqi woman threatened to douse herself with petrol. Throughout the process of researching and writing *War Crimes*, I was plagued with self-doubt. I frequently asked myself, 'What right do I have to tell this story? What do I know about the experiences of being an Australian Muslim?' And the truth, of course, is that I can never know that experience. What I have experienced, however, is the feeling of living outside dominant culture, of being 'other', and the bitter doses of prejudice that I have encountered in my life, while nowhere near the scale experienced by others, I believe, provides me with some degree of empathy.

A quick peruse of the newspapers indicates an empathy deficit among many of our politicians. On so many issues, they seem incapable of understanding and sharing the experiences of others. If only these politicians would listen, really listen, to others, to Muslims, to queers, to young people, to women, to the complexities and contradictions in all cultures, our world would be a much better place.

As playwrights that's what we do best, Valentine and I, we listen.

So in light of this, I approached Tasnim Hossain, a young woman who I first met while taking a writing workshop in Canberra. I asked Tasnim to read *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah*. As a young Australian Muslim writer I wanted to hear her thoughts on the play.

Angela: Who are you?

Tasnim: Amongst many other things, I identify with being Muslim, Australian, Bangladeshi, a woman. It's difficult as many assume that there must be inherent contradictions between the most important

aspects of my identity and indeed, in their most stringent, inflexible forms, one can argue that there are. I have had friends react with surprise or bemusement when I identify as a feminist, as in their minds there is no way in which I can reconcile that with my faith. For me, they sit side by side quite comfortably. The same applies to my Bangladeshi and Australian identities; the fact that I speak another language and have family overseas does not lessen the fact that Australia is my home and has been all of my life. Identity is not a zero-sum game.

Angela: In my family, if we want to keep the peace, we can't talk about politics. Often, at family gatherings, I must bite my tongue because I love them. Tasnim, have you ever profoundly disagreed with someone you love?

Tasnim: I have indeed disagreed profoundly with people I love and it is never easy. I am a huge supporter of picking your battles. Some things are worth fighting for, to the very last breath and pen stroke, whilst others are exhausting and disheartening for no gain. Those are the arguments not worth having, and sometimes, even though we disagree about something fundamental, the ties of blood or friendship will keep us bound. If I think, for even a moment, that I may open someone's mind, I will have that conversation. It is always worth trying.

Angela: When you first read Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah *did it feel familiar? Did it speak to your personal experience?*

Tasnim: Shafana says something that resonates deeply with me. On page 29, she says, 'I am not grateful to be tolerated. I am an Australian citizen. I do not have to ask to be tolerated'. For me, it has taken a long time to feel like that. In retrospect, the immense gratitude I felt as a hijab-wearing teenager who wasn't spat at, wasn't abused, who wasn't talked down to in classes or at the shops or in the streets, is actually a little heartbreaking. Respect and acceptance were never something that I felt I was owed as a fellow Australian, but rather, something I had to earn.

Angela: Do you think the experience you describe, of not feeling like

you were owed respect, of having to earn it, is particular to being a Muslim Australian? Could it also be true to the experience of say, a queer teenager or a young Aboriginal or Torres Straight Islander person?

Tasnim: I think there is indeed a strong correlation. For a long time now, I've felt a kind of kinship, I guess I would call it, with those who are structurally marginalised. I find intersectionality, as it relates to oppression, presents a compelling argument. I remember being really affected watching the BeyondBlue ads several months ago, which highlighted the subtle racism that Indigenous Australians faced. Though I would never assume that I know what it's like to face discrimination as an Indigenous Australian or queer-identifying person, I do know what it feels like to have nobody sit next to me on a bus.

Angela: I'm really interested in your identification as a feminist. Would you say that Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah *is a feminist play? Are they feminist characters?*

Tasnim: I think that *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* is a feminist play. Neither Shafana nor Sarrinah are defined in terms of their relationships to men. This is something that afflicts women generally, but particularly Muslim women and the perceptions of them. The fact that Shafana is a daughter and that Sarrinah is a wife does not matter. It is the centrality of this aunt-niece relationship which rings so true for me. Men have nothing to do with Shafana's decision to begin wearing the hijab, which was the case with me, and it is always frustrating when people make the assumption that my father forced me to wear it. That is not to say that this does not happen, but there is this overwhelming belief that the experiences of Muslim women can be homogenised into a few uninformed tropes. Muslim women are often viewed as passive onlookers in their own lives, if not outright victims. The denial of women's agency is always problematic, regardless of whether they are Muslim or not. That is not the case in this play; these two women are fierce, driven and intelligent in a way that does not fit in with popular understandings of what Muslim women are or can be, particularly ones who wear the hijab.

Angela: So Tasnim, who do you think is right? Shafana or Sarrinah? Who are you barracking for?

I think they both have completely legitimate arguments and I understand them both. I know of girls whose families have asked them to stop wearing the hijab, even though they are religious, because they fear that their daughters will be harassed or will miss out on opportunities. I don't know if there ever is a right decision, as what is right for one person can be very wrong for another. That said, I think I barrack for Shafana, there is something fearless and intoxicating about her youth and optimism.

Angela: I became a writer because I believed that art is revolutionary, that art has the capacity to change the world. Is this idealistic madness? How effective do you think theatre is or can be in changing the national conversation around religion and race and in particular, the debate around the hijab?

Tasnim: Maybe it is, but then I'm afraid that I am afflicted by the same madness. I suspect that we would be in good company; I think many people believe that art is one of those unquantifiable catalysts for change. I think theatre, particularly on our main stage, has the capacity to reach the most privileged and powerful elements of Australian society who might never have a chance to meet a Muslim woman in a hijab, let alone learn about what the hijab means to her. Theatres in Australia have the capacity to explore religion and race more broadly in a way that news bulletins cannot. Three minutes at six o'clock will never be able to capture the nuances, or the richness of the racially and religiously diverse communities which make up Australia. The artistry of writers, actors, designers and directors might come a little closer to conveying that complexity.

Angela: On page 30 of the play, Aunt Sarrinah warns Shafana that if she wears the scarf she'll be viewed as a spokesperson for Islam and I'm conscious that, for the purpose of this essay, I have approached you in much the same way. Is Aunt Sarrinah right? Is this your experience, and if so how do you field these questions?

Tasnim: Sarrinah's concerns ring very true. She warns Shafana that she will always be expected to have a ready response to any news stories that involve Muslims. Amongst other things, I daresay that the need to always have an opinion on anything happening in the world eventually contributed subconsciously to my decision to study International Relations at university. When September 11 happened, I was barely ten years old. In the days and months and years that followed, I ended up being one of the many Muslims, young and old, who suddenly had to arm themselves with an understanding of religion, politics and world events in a way that other Australians had the luxury of not having to do.

I have always welcomed questions about my faith, although it can be exhausting when questions do not come from a real desire to understand, but rather to reinforce pre-existing biases. All the same, I always take the view that if I don't answer these questions, people will get their information or opinions from other sources, which will possibly have nothing to do with the lived experiences of actual Muslims. I am happy to answer questions as long as people recognise that I am certainly not a scholar, nor do I seek to speak on behalf of all Muslims, either the one billion around the world or the almost 500,000 living in Australia. All too often, one person's view is taken to represent the collective. All I can do is speak about my understandings, confined as they are to particular lived experiences. As Shafana says in response to her aunt, 'I will answer any questions as well as I can. It will give me an opportunity to explain that Islam is not what so many people think'.

Angela: On page 30, Aunt Sarrinah also insinuates that Shafana may encounter 'sneers and full-throated abuse'. Do you believe that in the aftermath of the Abbott government's recent round of 'terrorism' raids and renewed calls by parliamentary renegades to 'ban the burqa', that incidents of 'sneers and full-throated abuse' have escalated?

Tasnim: Anti-Muslim incidents have indeed increased, particularly in the wake of the Sydney Siege. It feels like we, as a society, have regressed a decade. I thought that we were past the worst of it. I thought that we had moved beyond the reductive, blinkered, patronising view of veiled

women, whether in hijabs, niqabs or burqas, and past the debates that raged in parliament during the mid-2000s, about these womens' place in Australian society. The current political climate has certainly been unconducive to the kind of sustained, nuanced discussion that we, as a society, need to understand each other and grow.

Angela: A day or two after the Sydney Siege you emailed me and told me of an experience you had in a shopping centre in Canberra. What happened and how do you feel now in the aftermath?

Tasnim: It was the morning of the siege, I was in a shopping centre and a woman came up behind me and swore at me. Even though I felt her breath on the side of my face, I thought at first that I must have been mistaken as I've never been abused so blatantly on the street before. Luckily one of my mentors in the theatre came across me, standing there in shock. It also happened to be the first day of full-time rehearsals for my first show, about growing up Muslim and Bangladeshi in Australia, and she was asking me about it when I started crying, rather alarmingly. She told me something that was really heartening: that people are reactive and abusive when they are afraid, and that is why we need to make art and keep doing what we do. The emergence of #illridewithyou on social media later that day was extremely moving and gave me hope, just like Shafana has hope, that we, as a society, can be so much more than our fears.

Angela: Does this play and others like it inspire you to write?

Tasnim: This play gives me hope that there is space on Australian stages to tell nuanced stories about complex people from diverse backgrounds, and *within* their own communities. It inspires me to write characters who are contradictory and flawed in a way that are never seen in the public sphere, but who I know exist because they are the ones I know and love, or hate, and grew up with.

Angela: I can't wait to see your plays on the Australian stage.

Tasnim: That's the dream!

So what of the future? I wonder, in another forty years, will we be stuck in the same nightmarish loop of fear and loathing, unable to genuinely accept and celebrate the differences of culture? We often forget that societies and individuals are not always progressive; instead like a pendulum they can swing back farther than we dare to contemplate. All the more reason why storytellers like Buzo, like Valentine, like Hossain, must imagine a different future, they must dream it into being.

References:

1. Bowers, C. All of Me: The tale of a brown girl with big dreams. Australian Plays 2014 Available from: https://australianplays.org/all-of-me

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About Tasnim Hossain:

TASNIM HOSSAIN is a playwright and performance poet. Her work has been staged by ATYP and Apocalypse Theatre Company, and published by Currency Press. Her first solo show was developed through Playwriting Australia's Lotus Program for Asian-Australian Writers and premiered at Perth's Fringe World, with a second season at You Are Here festival in Canberra. She was an Associate Artist at Canberra Youth Theatre and is currently participating in The Hive, The Street Theatre's script development program in Canberra. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (International Relations) from the Australian National University in 2013.

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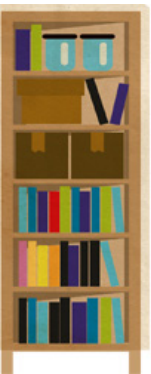

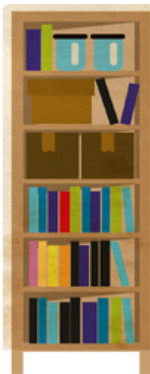

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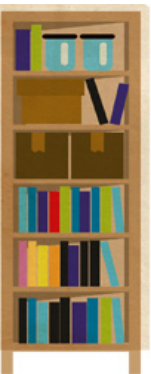

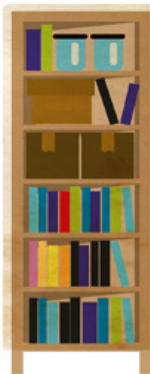

Copyright Agency's Reading Australia website has been live since October 2013 and has already engaged thousands of teachers Australia-wide with its free resources for primary and secondary students.

'We developed the website and the resources with the specific aim of getting Australian literature back into schools', says Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund Manager, Zoë Rodriguez.

The First 200 list of works on the Reading Australia website was chosen by the Australian Society of Authors' Council after considerable debate and discussion.

'Teacher resources have so far been developed for 21 titles (10 primary, 11 secondary) in partnership with the Primary English Teaching Association of Australia, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the English Teachers Association NSW, with another 20 secondary resources already commissioned and due on the website before the end of June.'

The teacher resources include classroom activities, assessments and links to the new Australian curriculum. In addition, the secondary resources include an introduction to the text from high profile authors and artists, such as Libby Gleeson, David Berthold, Melissa Lucashenko, Malcolm Knox and Alice Pung.

‘The extra funding, which will begin in the new financial year, will rapidly expand the free resources for teachers with 20 teaching modules related to books for primary students, 40 for secondary students and 30 for tertiary students’, Ms Rodriguez says.

‘It’s a tremendous commitment to Australian authors, publishers, teachers, students and general readers. We feel Reading Australia will put adored, but sometimes forgotten, Australian books back on people’s radars, beginning a whole new love affair with some of this country’s finest authors.’

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