

Cooking as Theater: Refugees Serve Up Their Experiences With Traditional Meals

Kitchen Stories at the Fleischerei

by *Moyeti Umpata*

Abdohabman Hawy didn't think twice when his father made him choose between doing military service in Iraq or following his dream of becoming an artist. He came from a military family and being a soldier was regarded as proof of manliness. But not for Hawy.

"I told my father I would rather not be a man than to become a soldier," said Hawy to the audience, while he cooked a pot of couscous.

Hawy's story is just one of 13 migration stories told at the Fleischerei Project Theater Studio in Vienna's 7th District. It is part of the ongoing series, "Migration Mondays: Kitchen Stories," created by the Austrian theater director Eva Brenner and Nigerian-born writer Charles Okocha.

From the outside, the Fleischerei looked like an old store because of its huge windows and the eclectic selection of furniture and set pieces. A white piano stood beside a table near the stove and kitchen supplies.

In another corner, a comfortable set of leather sofas and a bookshelf combined to create the illusion of a private home. Where one would expect the back wall of the stage, though, there was a raised platform, set with folding chairs for the audience.

The crowd was in a celebratory mood, a typical theater atmosphere and the hint of an anticipation. To pass the time, people gazed at the eclectic scenery which had about 10 televisions showing the previous cooking sessions attached high above the stage. There was an improvised kitchen, a white piano, a ladder, and several pots of plants below the live-up television screens.

The event started a couple of minutes after 7 p.m. The host, dancer Sybille Sarlabau, introduced Hawy to the public. The chopped tomatoes, zucchini, and green paprika were already inside a big silver pot. Hawy started frying onions on a skillet when the questions began. How had he found his way to Austria, wondered Sarlabau.

"Yes, well, on the 12th of July of 1996, I came in through the Hungarian border," said a



The Fleischerei is a restaurant and performance space for real life stories, that are shared between kitchen and stage.

Photo: Elisabeth

ably-looking Hawy. In Iraq, he had worked at a foundry making gigantic Saddam Hussein statues, but his father had kicked him out of the house for choosing a child over a rifle. Hawy had lost his home, but he had no regrets. "Anything is allowed when you are looking for freedom," he said.

A fake passport got him out of Iraq and he traveled his way up through the Middle East and the Balkans. But he ran out of luck at the Hungarian/Austrian border. The police intercepted him and sent him to an immigrant's detention center. He was later released with the help of a journalist and gradually got himself on his feet with the help of Caritas, the social welfare arm of the Catholic Church.

The evening gradually evolved from a kind of reality theater to an improvised community meeting, fulfilling one of the objectives of the Kitchen Stories project. The Fleischerei is trying to establish a new way of thinking and acting through "a theater of empowerment connected to civil-rights movements worldwide, according to the theater's website. At the same time, they hope to transform 'dead spaces' into living

spaces.

Dinner was finally ready and the audience lined up for a scoop of couscous and vegetables. Strangers mingled over dinner, after serving herself a generous portion of couscous, a middle-aged woman approached Hawy and thanked him for the meal.

Once everybody was full, Hawy relaxed, opening up gradually until the initial distinction of audience transformed and they became more like guests at Hawy's home. The theater became a family kitchen where people sat around and told stories over a meal. Intimacy came to a head when Hawy broke down "the fourth wall" and sat casually on the steps between the stage and the audience.

Class of wine in hand, he explained a painting he had done to expel some of his demons. Regulated at the sight of blood, he had not been able to bring himself to assist at his daughter's birth. "The guilt from not helping," drove him to try to capture both experiences on a single canvas.

"Why did we let all those people die?" he wondered. This question is the origin of every-

thing he is, as he said that it "is where my past, present and future are." After finishing his studies at the School of Applied Arts in Vienna, he took a year off from art, because his goal was to break away from all those memories. He might have succeeded – if it had not been for the current conflict in Iraq. He is worried about his family, recently driven from their home by terrorists. "I cannot explain what is happening, because not even I understand it," he said. He suspects that Al-Qaeda plays an important role in sparking today's violence because the Sunnis and the Shites were not enemies before the war.

Going back to one of the questions for now, but he is content to stay here, he has no patriotic attachments. "Whenever I can offer something, I will do it," said Hawy. Home is wherever he can be free to do his art. "I have my atelier, that is my real home, my temple."

This final night of the season, as so many times before, the Fleischerei had become a home where strangers gathered for dinner in a cozy setting. As Hawy was leaving, a woman from the audience rushed over to say goodbye, as if she had known him for a long time.