

The German theater company Rimini Protokoll focuses on four muezzins from Cairo in their play "Radio Muezzin," to be staged in İstanbul as part of the İDANS International Contemporary Dance and Performance Festival.

CAIRO MUEZZINS TAKE TO İSTANBUL STAGE IN RIMINI PROTOKOLL PLAY

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In the Egyptian capital of Cairo, during the time of Hosni Mubarak's presidency, the government called for the adhan -- the Muslim call to prayer -- to be centralized: The call to prayer would be broadcast to all mosques simultaneously from a radio channel, thus avoiding the cacophony that arose from the varied styles of adhans recited from the city's nearly 30,000 mosques.

But that government decision was a threat to the diversity of prayer cultures and would also render the thousands of muezzins jobless.

The Berlin-based documentary theater company Rimini Protokoll, upon finding out about the situation in Cairo, decided to take the matter onto the theater stage and that's how they came up with "Radio Muezzin."

The documentary theater performance will be staged twice this week in İstanbul as part of the ongoing İDANS İstanbul International Contemporary Dance and Performance Festival, which is marking its sixth edition with a packed program that will stretch into May 2013.

The play focuses on four muezzins: a blind Quran teacher who travels to the mosque by minibus for two hours every day, a farmers' son and former tank driver from Upper Egypt who vacuums the carpet in his mosque, an electrician who began reciting the Quran after a serious accident, and a bodybuilder and runner-up world champion in Quran recitation, who make up the non-professional cast of the play.

The play has them meet an engineer who learned to encode radio signals at the Aswan Dam. As all four muezzins reconstruct their own lives on the stage, the transformation of the call to prayer also becomes apparent.

"Radio Muezzin," which has been touring

world stages since 2009, will be onstage Thursday and Friday at the Halk Congress Center in İstanbul. The play's director Stefan Kaegi spoke about "Radio Muezzin" in a recent interview:

How did you first become aware of the "world of the muezzins"?

The fact that a technical procedure would replace a religious ritual affected me deeply and I started wondering what would happen to those people who were going to "lose their voices." This play gave me a chance to talk about Cairo via people [we don't meet every day] and to draw a picture of the Middle East that is more complex than images of terrorists they see on TV. The muezzins will not lose their jobs; they'll teach the Quran, or take care of the mosques. But they'll lose a lot of prestige and their love for their jobs when they're not allowed to make the call to prayer.

This is a complicated situation; some Cairo residents believed the city would be less noisy and less chaotic acoustically [if that project was implemented].

How was the preparation process? How did you persuade the muezzins to take part in the play?

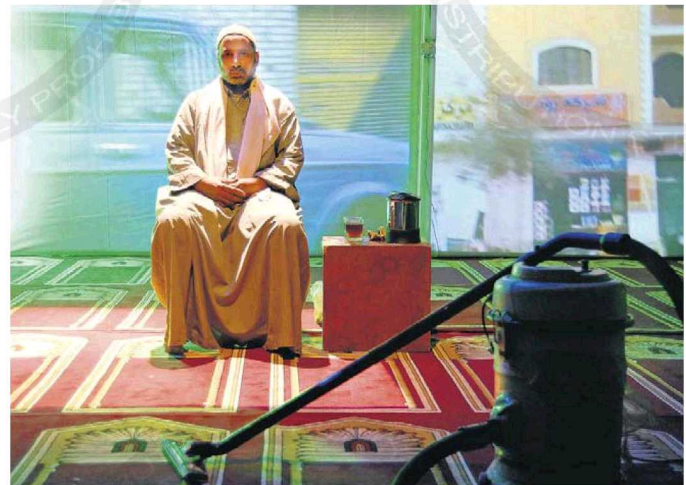
I went from one [Cairo] mosque to another and met more than 30 muezzins. Some of them were former truck drivers and some were living in the mosque because they had no money or home. In the end I chose four muezzins with diverse [stories] who are capable of representing the pious people of Egypt.

All the leading cast members have truly colorful personalities. Did this surprise you? What kind of people did you expect to meet when you were setting out on the project?

I had no idea on what kinds of people they would be until the moment I met each of them.

You say you're aiming to pull back the veil on reality in your work. How close is "Radio Muezzin" to realizing this cause?

I guess we remained loyal to the leading characters' biographies. They're truly interesting charac-



ters. ... They all have a lot to say.

Very recently a video angered the Muslim world after it was posted on a video sharing website. With your work, you're looking at the world of people from a different religion that you are. What is it that makes you unprejudiced?

I'll never understand what radical [people] who produce those kinds of provocative stuff are aiming for. What they do can be defined as a kind of visual terrorism that is aimed at creating chaos and hostility among people. Our play offers its viewers the prospect of witnessing private lifestyles, stories and situations and to understand them. It might also help the viewer to question his/her prejudices against Islam if they have such thoughts. As it is, the hysterical reactions of radicals, and I'm speaking about both sides, is the result of the present day world, which connects people [via technology] without first giving them a chance to listen and understand each other.

Theater can achieve the exact opposite of what TV has done: It can really bring people together.

What kinds of changes did this project bring about in your point of view?

I got to learn about Cairo! And it was so inspiring to work with the artists of this truly amazing city; dramaturge Laila Soliman, sound designer Mahmoud Refaat, video artist Dina Hamed and set designer Mohammed Shukry.

Do you think documentary theater has to overcome obstacles to reach more people?

It [a documentary theater piece] has to be original, entertaining and complex at the same time -- as is the case with all fields of the arts. We're not only presenting the truth on the stage; we need really clear-cut editing and to fine tune [everything] to find a balance in the text's flow and in all the tools we employ in the play. At the end of the day, what we make is still theater.