

THEATRE

LET'S TALK

SACHLI GHOLAMALIZAD

Mothers and daughters

EN | A lot can be said about the relations between mothers and daughters. Especially when the daughter has grown up in a totally different culture from the mother's. Sachli Gholamalizad decided she would no longer beat about the bush: she filmed a powerfully honest confrontation with her mother for a probing theatre project, *A Reason to Talk*. MICHAËL BELLON

Sachli Gholamalizad (1982) is an Iranian-born Belgian actress and playwright who fetched up in the Noorderkempen district at the age of five. She attended an arts-oriented secondary school in Antwerp and then fled to the big city, Brussels, where she lived for seven years and took a theatre course at the Rits (now the RITCS, the Royal Institute for Theatre, Cinema and Sound). Her time at the Rits was confusing, as the approach to theatre there didn't mesh with her own quest for a less theatrical theatre, with less irony and more authenticity, and with a need for and the freedom to try out hybrid forms – for example, between theatre and documentary. Even though she is now also involved in work for television (such as *De bunker*, on VTM), her first one-woman show, *A Reason to Talk*, was a big hit in 2013. It won her the Circuit X prize at Theater aan Zee in 2014, the Roel Verniers prize at the recent Theaterfestival, and the Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe this summer. An extraordinary achievement for a courageous project that had been brewing for years.

"Nine years ago, I worked on a documentary with a woman friend of mine who is a film-maker in Iran," says Gholamalizad. "At the time, my mother and my grandmother were also travelling back to Iran for the first time, in order to get to know the country of their birth better. That was the first time that the three of us were alone together. I decided then that I had to do something with the fact that we all three of us were somewhat at sea between Iran, where we aren't really entirely at home, and Belgium, where we started a completely new life as first-generation immigrants. I wanted to deal with that rupture, which also took place between parents and children, in a very personal way."

"A few years ago, I felt an urgent need to get started on it. I just get depressive from not doing what I have to do. Even after I had borrowed the camera, I kept putting it off, but in the end it was a major victory when I pushed that camera under her nose. In the end, I spent three more years, all told, working on this project."

The result is a hybrid between theatre and documentary.

SACHLI GHOLAMALIZAD: A great combination, and one I want to explore further. More so than film, theatre can touch people very directly. With film and docu-

mentary, moreover, you can show people onstage who aren't actors but can still generate raw, intense emotion. The camera also ensured that my mother began to recount things very openly. Because she likes being in front of a camera, but also because she herself felt the need to begin the conversation.

Is that what it's about – what had remained unsaid over a whole lifetime between mother and daughter?

GHOLAMALIZAD: It's about growing up, about the relations between parents and children, who, despite their best efforts, feel they're not always that connected with each other – even though they really love each other. It's about a shared past that hasn't been come to terms with and the inability to enter into a conversation about it. It's also about the fear that you might one day pass on all those undigested traumas to your own children. And about a culture that is being partially lost, as I am the last generation of my family to have known Iran. If you look back over those generations, you realise that a lot depends on the context in which you have grown up. My mother, my grandmother, and I all had different expectations. By fighting our own battles, each one also paved the way for the next generation.

Did you hesitate for long about recounting things that are really very private to the whole world onstage?

GHOLAMALIZAD: Sure. I really went through agonies, crying all night, and suffering panic attacks. But the motivation was stronger than the fears, which I have now overcome. I had gone in for self-censorship for too long in my life. It was now or never to sort that out.

Did your mother feel the same way about it?

GHOLAMALIZAD: Yes. She is really glad that she got involved. Despite the fact that we were quarrelling at the time, which is why the tone of the performance is so harsh.

When we were shooting it, we felt a great openness to each other and we knew that we were doing something worthwhile. When I'm on the stage myself in front of the camera and I'm confronted with that footage, I still feel those emotions and I

am compelled to show them too. I think that's what makes the piece so moving. After performances, moreover, I get to hear lots of other stories about spectators' experiences with their parents or children. **The form you adopt also refers to something we all do more and more: talking to each other via a screen.**

GHOLAMALIZAD: True. My parents have gone through so much and done so much for us, whereas our generation sometimes hides in a cowardly way behind all sorts of alter egos on the Internet and scarcely dares to engage any more in real communication about subjects that matter.

My role onstage is a serving one: I wanted to play a bridging function between the public and my mother's generation, about which so much has been said but that was itself silenced.

"Our generation sometimes hides in a cowardly way behind all sorts of alter egos"

The refugee crisis gives your story a topical charge. What do you make of it?

GHOLAMALIZAD: I would like to help offer an enlightening picture of the refugee issue and to bring about a world that thinks in a less monochrome way about issues like that. Someone who flees with his family is taking a decision that will have an effect for generations. On the other hand, I'm not a spokesperson for anyone at all. In interviews, people often ask about our flight from Iran, but I'm more than a refugee. These days, I get lots of e-mails and phone calls asking me to take part in discussions of all sorts, but I've no interest in that, because it's just not my story. **A**

A REASON TO TALK

23 & 24/10, 20.30, Beursschouwburg, www.beursschouwburg.be, 12/12, 20.30, CC Strombeek, www.cstrombeek.be

NL | Sachli Gholamalizad, een Belgische actrice en theatermaakster van Iraanse afkomst, vermengt theater met documentaire. In het gelauwerde *A reason to talk* gaat ze een moeilijk gesprek aan met haar moeder.

FR | Sachli Gholamalizad, actrice et metteuse en scène belge d'origine iranienne, entame le théâtre et documentaire. Dans le très apprécié *A Reason to Talk*, elle entame une conversation difficile avec sa mère.