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# **Layla the Body Washer and Incident at Jerusalem**

By

NICHOLAS A. PATRICCA

**Dramatic Publishing Company**

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# **Layla the Body Washer and Incident at Jerusalem**

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## INTRODUCTION

How do we remember the dead? The dying? How do we work for peace in a world that never ceases warring? How do we make sense of being either activists or nothing-ists? I recall the bumper sticker of the 1960s, “If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem.”

Never more so than now.

“Do wars ever truly end?” Aliya asks in *Layla the Body Washer*.

Do we end wars, or do wars end us because we leave it to the business of war-makers?

What do we say to ourselves, what do we ask, how do we live alongside wars?

I once lived in Sarajevo for a summer in 1982, before the Olympics, before the last war that changed the name of that country from Yugoslavia to Bosnia Herzegovina. That visit, which seemed at the time entirely by chance, changed me forever.

Perhaps we are only concerned about lives in remote countries when we know the names and the faces, the streets and the homes. My visit to the former Yugoslavia graced me with friends, whose lives I keep close and nurture even now.

Wars have been ever present throughout the history of humanity, but that war particularly changed my way of seeing. Sarajevo, the city held hostage then, is still held hostage now, though it is coerced to a false calm under a tenuous peace accord. When I go back to that city, I witness the war kept alive in the hearts of individuals, just as we keep war alive in our country—we have yet to recover from our civil war. Rage still simmers, the war goes on, the seeds of war freshly planted with every generation. I turn 70 years old this month. I have never known a not-war era.

What can we do? How do we make change? What is our responsibility as witnesses? How do we work for peace?

Nicholas Patricca asks these questions in a language that is neither contemporary nor ancient, but something that I can only call sacred. His words are prayers, chants, fables for our times. He gives us stories both historic and contemporary.

I keep asking myself what I can do with my voice in this time of constant war. Nicholas Patricca gives me hope that all is not lost. We are each, as Rumi wisely reminds us, capable of working for peace: “We may be only a drop, but we contain the ocean inside us.”

I want to bring to your attention here today especially this—we cannot choose sides in any war without adding fuel to the fire. How do we go forward, then, as peace makers?

Activist poet Thich Nhat Hanh made me understand the power of being peace by making peace with everyone we meet today and always, every thought and word and action. This is much harder than holding up a sign. The way to peace is to be peace.

“Let the dead teach us,” Nic Patricca instructs. He confessed in a letter: “It is so hard to keep up one’s courage to dare to write ... how presumptuous to think that what I have to say or what I see matters to another soul ... that it is worthy of another’s contemplation. I always shudder at the hubris of the writer.”

His homily for me, for you, for us:

“We have become story tellers.

We think it is important to name the dead.

And to remember.”

—Sandra Cisneros

Dec. 1, 2024

San Miguel de Allende

“Nicholas Patricca is a poet trapped inside a playwright or a playwright trapped in a poet. These two plays—as do all his works—remind one of ancient ritual dramas as much as ruminations written from a time deep in our shared history and a place deep, deep in the human heart. These plays challenge us to look squarely at the world and know its suffering. They ask us to do the hardest thing—to feel.”

—Ian Brennan  
Co-creator *Monster* and *Glee*

## AUTHOR’S NOTE

*Layla the Body Washer* and *Incident at Jerusalem* were written because of my friends and colleague theatre artists Cecilie Keenan and Rick Paul, who have always generously supported me throughout my theatre career. Cecilie inspired me to write *Layla*, which she so expertly brought to life in Rhino Fest 2024. I wrote *Incident* to honor the work and achievements of Rick, the founder of the Lionheart Gay Theatre Company, which pioneered plays and performance pieces, especially in the early days of AIDS, when gay theatre was not mainstream. Rick produced several of my works over many decades. *Incident* serves both as a companion piece to *Layla* and as a tribute to the name Lionheart, which announces the courage so necessary to create and present works of art in performance for the contemplation of a live audience. It is my hope that these two plays might open hearts to compassionate action in our world of ceaseless conflict.

I dedicate these plays to all theatre artists who work for peace. Thank you.

—Nicholas A. Patricca

# **Layla the Body Washer**

*Layla the Body Washer* was presented at the Rhinoceros Theater Festival at Facility Theatre in Chicago in June 2024.

CAST:

LAYLA..... Momina Shahzad  
ALIYA..... Joy Valdez-Pappas  
MUSICIAN..... Whyne Braswell

PRODUCTION:

Director ..... Cecilie Keenan  
Advisor..... Rick Paul

# Layla the Body Washer

## CHARACTERS

ALIYA: Body washer.

LAYLA: Apprentice.

MUSICIAN: Performs music and sound effects.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

TIME & PLACE: Now. Somewhere in the Middle East ... and everywhere.

SETTING: Catacomb areas dedicated to preparing the dead for burial, during a war.



# Layla the Body Washer

## Scene 1

*(Traditional Arabic music plays. The music gradually becomes intense contemporary Arabic fusion rock as the play progresses. Lights up on LAYLA placing herbs in various packets. ALIYA is present in shadow and in LAYLA's memory.)*

LAYLA *(to the audience)*. Aliya found me in a bombed-out building. I was hiding, trying to make myself so small no one could see me. Trying to become part of the rubble. Aliya heard the sobs I could not swallow. The sobs I choked on. She took my hand. She said nothing. Just took my hand and walked me out.

I was twelve. Now I'm her apprentice.

*(LAYLA moves to the body of a deceased person. She mixes some herbs with water.)*

LAYLA *(cont'd)*. From the Ancient Egyptians, we learned to use camphor oil with water to wash the body. And cedar oil when we have it. Sometimes we put rosemary leaves in the waters. When we have water.

*(LAYLA starts wiping a hand with a white cotton cloth soaked in camphor-infused water from a small bottle.)*

LAYLA *(cont'd)*. It's so strange. It is hard for me to get used to touching someone who won't ever laugh again, or cry or breathe. Have you ever looked closely at a body that no longer has life in it? It is so strange. All looks normal. You recognize the person who is no longer there. How can that be?

I watch Aliya's weathered hands, so carefully she touches them. As if they were not dead at all but in some kind of strange sleep. Aliya traces the lines around their eyes to make sure she has caught all their tears. She calls the tears of the dead the waters of life.

I am learning to trace the map of life in the wrinkles and scars and lines running through a woman's body. I make up stories of their lives from these imperfections of their bodies. Aliya scolds me:

"These are not imperfections, Child, they are the memories of life itself. Your body remembers everything that has ever happened to you."

As we tie the knots, we whisper their names into the linen, when we know their names. When we don't know their names, we whisper a name we think they will like.

First we tie the shroud around the head, then around the feet, then we make ties across the body. We pray as we work.

We make up things about the dead. From what we see in the lines on the face. When there is a face to see. From what we can tell from the softness or hardness of their hands, from what we see of the flesh and bones of the dead.

We have become story tellers.

We think it is important to name the dead.

And to remember.

*(LAYLA bows her head and starts to pray over the body. ALIYA bursts into present consciousness.)*

ALIYA *(suddenly)*. Layla! We don't need prayers, we need water. LAYLA *(moves from the body)*. There is no water. The taps are dry.

*(ALIYA takes over tending the body.)*

ALIYA. Even when the taps run. The water is polluted. Get some bottled water.

LAYLA. There is no money.

ALIYA. Steal some.

LAYLA. Stealing is *haram*!

*(ALIYA removes a bracelet from her wrist and gives it to LAYLA.)*

ALIYA. This was my mother's bracelet. Take it. Make sure you get a good price for it. Buy as many bottles as you can find.

*(Distant aerial bombardments. Debris falls from the ceiling and walls.)*

ALIYA *(cont'd)*. Don't get killed.

*(LAYLA exits. ALIYA speaks to the dead person.)*

ALIYA *(cont'd)*. I apologize. I do not have the three waters to properly cleanse your body. Perhaps Allah will accept my tears.

*(ALIYA gently holds the hand of the dead person.)*

ALIYA *(cont'd)*. Must death be a lonely thing.

*(ALIYA kisses the hand. Holds it against her cheek.)*

ALIYA *(cont'd)*. Surely this hand has knowledge of love. Surely, it remembers the feel of a friend's face.

*(More bombardment.)*

ALIYA *(cont'd)*. Men have time to sit in cafès, drink coffee, complain, order women about and kill each other. But no time to make peace. Or provide me with clean water.

*(The lights flicker, go out.)*

ALIYA (*cont'd*). I don't even know your name.

*(ALIYA sings a traditional Arab lullaby.)*

## Scene 2

*(ALIYA is preparing a body for burial according to the ritual requirements of Islam. LAYLA is chanting an Arabic prayer [Sunan an-Nasa'i 333] softly in the background.)*

LAYLA.

اللَّهُمَّ اغْسِلْ خَطَايَايَ بِمَاءِ التَّلَجِّ وَالْبَرَدِ وَنَقِّ قَلْبِي مِنَ الْخَطَايَا كَمَا نَقَّيْتَ الثُّوبَ  
الْأَبْيَضَ مِنَ الدَّنَسِ

[Allahummaghsil khatayaya bi-ma'ith-thalj wal-barad was naqqi qalbi min al-khataya kama naqayta ath-thawb al-abyad min ad-danas]

ALIYA. O Allah, wash away her sins with the three waters of your mercy. Purify her soul so she can complete her journey to be at home with you.

*(ALIYA washes an arm of the body.)*

ALIYA (*cont'd*). O Allah, grant her peace in her grave. Make her burial in holy ground the entrance to your gardens in Paradise.

*(Loud intrusive noise at tunnel entrance to the cellars.)*

ALIYA (*cont'd*). More bodies stacked against our doors. What do they think we are a factory?!

*(ALIYA washes the other arm.)*

ALIYA (*cont'd*). “May Allah take you into his hands and press you to his heart.”

LAYLA. Maryam is Christian.

ALIYA. Yes, yes I know. Thank God we know her name. Maryam, we share the same God. Surely we can share our prayers. Layla, go acquaint yourself with the dead outside our door. Find what you can to identify them.

*(LAYLA exits.)*

ALIYA (*cont'd, speaking to Maryam as she wraps her in linens*). I have to distract Layla when I take shortcuts in the rituals. She’s a real stickler for details. I know you will understand. I’m sure the Virgin Mary of your faith also understands. We Muslim women honor her. The Virgin Mary knows we women do what we can to protect life. To sustain life. So, we take a few shortcuts ... we get the job done.

*(ALIYA sings a few lines of a popular Arabic song, completes wrapping the body in linens according to Islamic ritual with ties at head and feet. LAYLA enters.)*

ALIYA (*cont'd*). Maryam is ready for burial.

### Scene 3

*(ALIYA and LAYLA, cold and hungry, are huddled together in a corner of the basement. LAYLA is sobbing quietly. She is suffering a panic attack.)*

ALIYA (*cont'd*). Hush child. We don’t want the men to hear us. We must be strong for the living as well as the dead.

*(ALIYA takes one of LAYLA’s hands. Rubs it.)*