

Reinventing Isabelle Eberhardt: Rereading Timberlake Wertenbaker's *New Anatomies*

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New Anatomies (1981), Timberlake Wertenbaker's first play to be published (in 1984), chronicles the life of Isabelle Eberhardt, the European traveller and writer who lived in Algeria cross-dressed as an Arab man at the turn of the last century. Intrigued, in her own words, "by the mental liberation in the simple physical act of cross-dressing," Wertenbaker was originally planning to write a play about three cross-dressing women (novelist George Sand, Japanese poet and courtesan Ono Kamachi, and Isabelle Eberhardt), but she became fascinated with Isabelle Eberhardt (Wertenbaker vii). Her chief interest in *New Anatomies*, then, lies in Eberhardt's cross-dressing and its relation to the formation of sexual, gendered, and also religious and national identity.¹ Focusing on the fluidity of gender represented by cross-dressing and the fluidity of national boundaries represented by Eberhardt's (re)invention of her own identity, Wertenbaker's play remakes the historical *fin-de-siècle* Isabelle Eberhardt as a feminist icon for the early 1980s. In his important study of historical drama, *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre*, Freddie Rokem notes that by "performing history a double or even triple time register is frequently created: the time of the events and the time the play was written and in some cases also [...] the later time when it was performed" (19). A contemporary reading of *New Anatomies*, critical or especially theatrical, then, needs to rethink Eberhardt's experiences yet again to take account of audiences' quite different perspective on and fascination with relations between Westerners and Arabs at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In this essay, by examining Wertenbaker's use of her documentary sources, I

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will explore the aesthetic and ethical implications of Isabelle Eberhardt's historicity for the dramatist herself and for her audiences, particularly for those audiences who first encounter *New Anatomies* at the "later time" of the early twenty-first century. *New Anatomies* illuminates both the pleasures of history plays and the problems in reception that may arise from their "triple time register."

Isabelle Eberhardt was the illegitimate daughter of a German-Russian woman, Nathalie de Moerder (*née* Eberhardt), wife of a Russian officer, who had run away to Geneva with her children and their tutor, Alexander Trophimowsky. Born in Geneva in 1877, Eberhardt had an unusual upbringing. Even in Geneva she engaged in conventionally male occupations and dressed as a boy. Trophimowsky, an anarchist and nihilist who converted to Islam, taught his daughter history, geography, philosophy, classical and modern European languages, and Arabic. Influenced by romantic nineteenth-century Orientalism, Eberhardt was always fascinated by Arab lands and the desert. From 1897 on she lived variously in Algeria, Switzerland, and France. In 1900 she met Slimène Ehnni, an Algerian soldier with French citizenship, whom she eventually married. Having converted to Islam, Eberhardt joined the Qadria brotherhood of Sufis. In 1901 she was the victim of an attempted murder by a member of the Tidjanya brotherhood, at odds with the Qadria and supporters of the French. She left Algeria but returned for her attacker's trial. Eberhardt helped to support herself by writing for the newspaper *El Akhbar*. In 1903 she met General Lyautey, who, unlike previous French authorities who had seen Eberhardt as a troublemaker, saw her potential as an agent of French colonialism and, in effect, a spy. In Lyautey Eberhardt thought she saw a kinder face of colonialism. In any case, her liaison with him allowed her to travel freely. Ill from malaria and possibly syphilis and having lost all of her teeth, Eberhardt died at the age of 27, ironically by drowning in the desert, in a flash flood at Aïn-Sefra in 1904. In addition to her essays, Eberhardt wrote stories based on her experiences and diaries.

Eberhardt's overriding quest in her short life was for personal fulfillment, including success as a writer. In her diary, she observes that "truly superior people are those preoccupied with the quest for better selves" (Eberhardt 9). Though her biography seems to place her at the center of today's concerns about colonialism and gender, Eberhardt herself was uninterested in the politics of either. She supported the Arabs against the French in a personal way but was not actively opposed to colonialism. Indeed, like many middle- or upper-class European women who were able to pursue unconventional, non-female careers in Africa and the Middle East, she had the freedom and privilege to travel and behave as she did precisely because she was European. Eberhardt was not interested in women, about whom she sometimes makes disparaging remarks in her writings. And she chose male dress not to make a statement about gender roles but for pragmatic reasons (Rice 210). Her dress enabled her to live among Arab men as an equal. Arab courtesy called upon Eberhardt's Arab friends to accept Isabelle—or Si Mahmoud Saadi (her Arab name)—for who she said she was, even though they knew she was a woman. Her friendships with Arab men were personal relationships in which she sought sexual fulfillment through her many liaisons and the spiritual wisdom of Sufi mysticism through her membership in the Qadria brotherhood.²

"Isabelle Eberhardt" is an elusive figure because her biography is so multi-layered. Her life story has been subjected to numerous reconstructions, beginning with her own quest to forge an identity for herself that transcended conventional national and gendered definitions and the constructions placed upon her by contemporaries. The reinvention of Isabelle Eberhardt began shortly after her death. Victor Barrucand, the editor of *El Akhbar* who had befriended Eberhardt, "coauthored" selections from her writings under the title *Dans l'ombre chaude de l'Islam* (1905). Barrucand's sensational, almost pornographic, additions rendered an exotic Isabelle who appealed to readers' Orientalist fantasies (Kobak 241; Clancy-Smith 72). Responding angrily to Barrucand, another admirer, René-Louis Doyen, offered a more hu-

manly troubled, less heroic interpretation of Eberhardt (Kobak 243). Her life was subsequently fictionalized in two plays, *L'Esclave errante* (1924) and *Isabelle d'Afrique* (1939), as well as mulled over by scholars. In the 1950s Cecily Mackworth published a biography, and Lesley Blanch offered a romantic portrait of Isabelle in a volume titled *The Wilder Shores of Love*. In the last thirty years, Isabelle Eberhardt has become a minor industry with the publication of her stories and diaries and a renewal of serious scholarly interest in her life. Some more recent commentators have seen her as a "protonationalist" or a "protofeminist" (Clancy-Smith 62), while others are more critical of her role in turn-of-the-century Algeria. Rana Kabbani is especially severe. Kabbani, writing in the late 1980s, regards Eberhardt as a kind of hippie who used the East for her own hedonistic pleasure and at the same time served patriarchy and colonialism. Julia Clancy-Smith, too, in the context of a volume of essays titled *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (1992), sees Eberhardt as a (perhaps unintentional) collaborator in the construction of French Algeria, as marginal to both French and Algerian culture, and indeed as "emblematic" of the "colonial encounter" (62).

Wertenbaker's play contributes a further complex layer to the image of Isabelle Eberhardt constructed by historians, or the received Isabelle, though it is probably more accurate to say that the dramatist creates the only Isabelle most members of her audience are likely to know. *New Anatomies* participates in the feminist revisions of history, biography, and myth that characterize many of the plays written by women in Britain in the last quarter of the twentieth century. More specifically, Wertenbaker's admiring dramatization and theatricalization of the life of Isabelle Eberhardt, written before the major post-colonial revisions of her protagonist's significance appeared, is very much a product of the early 1980s. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, the editors of *Western Women and Imperialism*, note the renewal of colonial nostalgia since 1970 and "its efforts to coopt feminist consciousness and activism," apparent in depictions of "'heroic' white women in colonial settings" (2). Wertenbaker's Isabelle—"a woman in

love with adventure, on a quest" (Wertenbaker vii)—may be regarded as such a portrait. While Wertenbaker does not romanticize Eberhardt, her admiring stance towards and focus on her central character at the expense of the play's other characters, both Western and Arab, do raise concerns about the reception of the play at this particular "later time" of the early twenty-first century. Since any consideration of the play today (in a post-9/11 world) inevitably participates in contemporary discourse on Western attitudes to Muslim people and societies and on relations between East and West, *New Anatomies*, while having a lot to offer an imaginative director, illuminates the difficulties of negotiating historical changes in the circumstances of reception.

The point is not simply that Western audiences' attitudes to Arabs have changed, as changing attitudes towards Jews have informed the reception of *The Merchant of Venice* over the last 410 years. Rather the whole center of gravity of *New Anatomies* would seem to have shifted over a relatively brief period of time. Audiences today (I offer the example of my students), while not unsympathetic towards Isabelle's personal quest for freedom from the constraints of gender and nationality, are likely to be struck, first of all, by the historical Eberhardt's relative freedom to negotiate political and gender relations between West and East, to exercise sexual and religious liberty in a community of Islamic men. Contemporary audiences have only to read the newspapers to be aware of the dangers that anyone who attempted to do today what Eberhardt did at the turn of the last century are likely to face. Our continuing academic interest in the politics of gender and the body ("new anatomies"), in transculturation, or in Orientalism and the construction of the "Other" is not invalidated by these new political circumstances, but anyone trying to understand what happens when *New Anatomies* is read or performed today should realize that these concepts are tangential to the pressing concerns of many audience members and readers. Timberlake Wertenbaker could not have anticipated the new kind of interest that her play would generate, and certainly not the reasons for that interest, a mere twenty-five years after it was written. The play's problematic and only partial

accommodation of the renewed interest in East-West relations is, however, attributable to the choices Wertenbaker makes in handling her documentary sources as well as to the limitations of the sources themselves. But the problem that *New Anatomies* illustrates is also endemic to history plays generally.

The perspective of history plays is always contemporary, as critics of British historical drama D. Keith Peacock and Richard H. Palmer both emphasize. Palmer asserts that “[a]ssumptions regarding history prevalent at the time that it is written have always shaped historical drama” (10). Such assumptions, rather than the always vexed question of historical accuracy, I would argue, produce problems in the reception of history plays. Peacock and Palmer situate *New Anatomies* within the context of revisionist feminist history plays written after 1970 that were designed to point out the victimization of women by men and to question conventional gender roles.³ Even apart from the play’s lack of attention to the broader political context of Eberhardt’s adventures, an absence that has, I argue, become problematic in the twenty-first century, the contemporary perspective of *New Anatomies* is that of a (now outdated) 1970s version of feminism. This is not simply to criticize the play for being outmoded. Such a criticism would be as impertinent and uninteresting as it is obvious; and, in any case, there is much in the play that is still fascinating and still relevant. Rather, I wish to point out that it is precisely because history plays are written from the perspective of their own time that they are particularly vulnerable—more so than other kinds of drama or than non-dramatic historical literature—to changes in their future audiences’ understanding of their subject matter. For a play in performance always takes place “now”; it always appears, therefore, to be contemporary with its most recent audience. Unlike non-historical drama, a play has to negotiate, not two, but, as Rokem observes, three time periods. The negotiation of this third time period often involves some very specific adjustments in theatrical interpretation. An example is the radical politics often mapped onto Shakespeare’s history plays in contemporary performances. Plays such as *New Anatomies*, whose

historical perspectives are of recent vintage, present a more subtle problem. Because so much of their ideology still overlaps with our own, discrepancies (though they could not have been foreseen) are the more disquieting.

New Anatomies was commissioned by the Women's Theatre Group at a time when Wertenbaker needed "a supportive women's environment for her writing" (Aston 8). That context helps to explain the focus of the work and its all-female casting (Roth, "Opening" 95). In *New Anatomies* Wertenbaker imaginatively recreates or at times makes up select formative experiences in her protagonist's life. She constructs Isabelle as an oppositional figure in every society in which she appears: middle-class Swiss, French colonial, Parisian feminist, and to a lesser extent Muslim Arab. It is in highlighting her oppositional individuality that Wertenbaker is perhaps most successful in reinventing Isabelle Eberhardt. But Wertenbaker's focus on Eberhardt's contrary life experiences leads her to offer little more than stereotypes, even caricatures (though often quite entertaining ones), of most of the other characters. Wertenbaker's choice of episodes from Eberhardt's life, as well as her major omission (there is no mention of Isabelle's husband—the "great love of my life" [Eberhardt 42]) and major addition (the scene in the Parisian salon), testifies to her concern with the fluidity of gender that inspired her play in the first place. The Brechtian-Churchillian dramaturgy of *New Anatomies*—its episodic structure, interspersal of turn-of-the-century music hall songs, and cross-casting—performs Wertenbaker's exploration of the construction of gender. All of the speaking parts are played by five actresses. Except for the actress playing Isabelle and her Arab self, Si Mahmoud, each actress plays a Western woman, an Arab man, and a Western man. While this casting choice foregrounds the performance of gender quite nicely, it can too easily deny autonomy to the Arab characters (four men and a silent woman) by folding the performance of national identity into the performance of gender identity.

New Anatomies begins shortly before Isabelle Eberhardt's death at Aïn-Sefra. Isabelle, sick, toothless, and almost hairless, enters de-

manding a cigarette and a “fuck” (5).⁴ She begins to tell her story to Séverine, a French journalist. This opening scene precludes any romantic expectations the audience might have had about Eberhardt’s experiences in the desert and introduces the rest of the play as the story of her life narrated by Isabelle herself. When Séverine questions the accuracy of what Isabelle is saying, Isabelle warns her, “Séverine, it is a courtesy in this country not to interrupt or ask questions of the storyteller... . When I pause, you may praise Allah for having given my tongue such vivid modulations” (8). This warning metatheatrically informs the audience’s reception of the story Wertenbaker herself is telling. Like Séverine, the audience of *New Anatomies* is asked to respond to the play’s “vivid modulations” rather than being concerned with the literal verifiability of its staged events. Wertenbaker thus incorporates into her play from its beginning one of the chief theoretical questions we ask of historical plays: what (to borrow the subtitle of Herbert Lindenberger’s *Historical Drama*) is the relation of literature and reality? Isabelle effectively dismisses this question as irrelevant and impertinent.

In her introduction to the first volume of her collected plays, Wertenbaker herself mentions the relation of *New Anatomies* to historical reality to explain “where my plays come from” (Wertenbaker vii), or in other words as a guide to her creative process. Such source study has long been a standard form of literary criticism. But a more interesting question today, especially given the pervasive skepticism among literary theorists about the recoverability of the past, is why the relationship between the play and the historical reality on which it is based matters. I shall return to this question below. Suffice it to say here that the two questions—the way in which an audience’s changed perceptions of the historical subject may inflect a play’s reception in unexpected ways and the issue of the dramatist’s respect for the documentary record—are intricately related, certainly in the case of *New Anatomies*, and, I believe, of other history plays as well.

Scenes two and three of the first act of *New Anatomies* take place in Geneva and depict the young Isabelle’s romantic imagination, her

close, possibly erotic, relationship with her “*feminine*” (8) brother Antoine, with whom she has imaginary Oriental adventures (“At last the silence descends on the darkening dunes” [14-15]), and her conflict with her practical bourgeois sister, Natalie, who wants her to marry and settle down. In scene four Isabelle and Natalie are visiting Antoine and his pregnant wife, Jenny, in Algiers. Wertenbaker uses Isabelle’s brother and especially sister-in-law, with whom Isabelle actually stayed in Marseilles, to depict the conservative, racist French colonial community in Algeria. In this scene, Wertenbaker criticizes also the exploitation of both commercial Orientalism (Natalie takes advantage of Arab generosity to obtain cheap “oriental” clothing to sell in Geneva) and sexual Orientalism (Jenny, trying on an Arab veil, teases Antoine, “I’m in your harem. You’re the sheikh” [23]). Meanwhile, Isabelle slowly, ritualistically, dresses herself in a jellaba. In the following scene, a monologue, she symbolically becomes Si Mahmoud, claiming that she will no longer answer as a woman: only if a voice calls,

you, you there, who need vast spaces and ask for nothing but to move, you, alone, free, seeking peace and a home in the desert, who wish only to obey the strange ciphers of your fate—yes, then I will turn around, then I’ll answer: I am here: Si Mahmoud. (26)

In scene six Isabelle seeks wisdom from her Arab friends, Saleh and Bou Saadi, and has a run-in with Captain Soubiel, representing the French authorities.

Act two opens with a scene in a Parisian salon, in which most of the women are for various personal reasons cross-dressed as men: Séverine, for example, is a lesbian who cross-dresses in order to go into public places with her girlfriends without being harrassed; singer Verda Miles makes her living as a male impersonator. None of the women, however, identifies herself as a man as Isabelle does. Wertenbaker uses the exchanges among the women in the salon to reflect on cross-dressing, gender roles, Orientalism (with which the women are fashionably obsessed), representation, and identity. For example,

Lydia's French servant, wearing "real" Arabic clothes "copied from the *Arabian Nights*," is said to be more "convincing" than a "genuine" Arab servant in another household (34-35). In contrast to such posing, Isabelle has to assert her identity as an Arab man. When Verda assumes that Isabelle's Arab dress is a "costume," Isabelle informs her, "It's not a costume, it's my clothes" (37), and in response to Séverine's expression of sexual interest in her, Isabelle insists: "I'm not a woman. I'm Si Mahmoud. I like men. They like me. As a boy, I mean" (40). Though the Parisian scene is Wertenbaker's invention, it has a historical basis in that in some circles cross-dressing was accepted in *fin de siècle* Paris and there was a vogue for appropriating disguises from other cultures; Isabelle visited Paris several times in 1900 (Clancy-Smith 66).

The remainder of *New Anatomies* takes place in Algeria. Scene two of the second act condenses Isabelle's initiation into the Qadria brotherhood and the Tidjani Muslim's attempt to murder her. Isabelle is thus seen to be oppressed by both French and Arab cultures, as Wertenbaker emphasizes when in the next scene the would-be Murderer turns into the Judge presiding over his trial, which becomes, in effect, Isabelle's trial. "I'm afraid we must ask you to refrain from visiting places where your presence might cause an unpleasant incident" (48), the Judge tells Isabelle. In scene four Isabelle meets Lyautey, who allows her to go to Morocco as his agent. Wertenbaker protects Isabelle from appearing complicit with the French but makes Séverine comment on the colonial aggression implicit in Lyautey's proceedings, as she refers to the "conquest" or at least the "digestion" of Morocco (54). Scene five picks up from the play's first scene in Aïn-Sefra. In the brief final scene Séverine, Lyautey, and the Judge discuss Isabelle's death. The Judge thinks she should be forgotten, but Lyautey has found Isabelle's journals. As the play ends, Séverine and Lyautey walk off "arm in arm" (57) to view and presumably promulgate/use Isabelle's story for their own purposes. Commentators, including Wertenbaker, as she herself clearly realizes, have similarly appropriated Eberhardt's story ever since.

Arguably, the best scenes in *New Anatomies*, certainly the most vivid and crisply written, are those dealing with gender and cross-dressing, reflecting Wertenbaker's original interests. Isabelle herself often speaks wittily and ironically on the topic. For example, when Séverine tells her to "stop playing," Isabelle replies: "Why? Travelling show: examine here the monstrous folds of uncorseted nature, the pervert seed that would not flourish on European manure" (52). By contrast, dialogue intended to convey a sense of Isabelle's Muslim friends, especially their quotations from Arabic poetry, can seem forced: "The warrior was brave. Alas the beautiful young man fell. He shone like silver. Now he is in Paradise, far from all troubles" (27). From a twenty-first-century perspective, the scenes involving Isabelle's Arab friends are the least satisfactory, probably because they are incidental (merely exemplifying Isabelle's progress) to Wertenbaker's design, though they seem central now, and because Wertenbaker herself had no access to the concerns of the Arab characters except through what Eberhardt chose to write about them. In her diaries, Eberhardt writes poetic descriptions of desert landscapes and skyscapes and much on her own feelings and financial problems, but she provides no very vivid portraits of her Arab friends, not even of her husband, Slimène. This lack of documentation in the play's ultimate source may well have encouraged Wertenbaker's almost exclusive focus on Eberhardt and resulted in the secondary figures in *New Anatomies* ending up as conventional stereotypes.

About Eberhardt herself, by contrast, there is a great deal of documentation (both her diaries and the writings of other commentators about her) on which Wertenbaker could draw. The numerous reinventions of Isabelle Eberhardt, selectively outlined above, should remind us that a creative writer who chooses to work with historical material may have to make her way through multiple, often contradictory, sources and interpretations. Freddie Rokem refers to the historical past as "a chaotic and frequently unmediated reality" (10). But there is no such thing as unmediated historical reality (except for those who live through it). The author of any source available to the creative

writer has already given the historical subject matter a form and an interpretation.⁵ The writer, of course, constructs her own form and interpretation based on her interests and the concerns of the time in which she is writing, creating a further intervention between history and the audience's reception of it.

That Wertenbaker acquired a great deal of information about Isabelle Eberhardt is apparent from her play. That she selects, condenses, and imaginatively reinvents significant experiences from Eberhardt's life to construct an intensely individualistic protagonist through whom she can explore the fluidities of gender and cultural/national identity that interest her is equally apparent. But though Wertenbaker reshapes the major incidents depicted in *New Anatomies* for her own purposes, a great many small details from Eberhardt's biography nonetheless find their way into the play. In function, Séverine is probably based on Victor Barrucand, but though Wertenbaker feels free to remake her journalist character as a woman, she chooses to name her after a real person at least marginally connected with Eberhardt: Séverine was the feminist editor of *La Fronde*, to which Eberhardt submitted a story (Kobak 110). The story about a stolen mare that Saleh tells Isabelle derives from a story told to the historical Isabelle Eberhardt by another person in another place (Kobak 172). The dramatic Isabelle's colorful rejection of Captain Soubiel's advances—"I'd rather kiss the open mouth of a Maccabean corpse dead of the Asiatic cholera" (31)—echoes her historical counterpart's recorded response to a different official (Randau, qtd. in Rice 217). While Wertenbaker felt free to make major interventions in Eberhardt's story (such as omitting Slimène or inventing Séverine), at the same time she seems to have wished to weave as many historical details (however rearranged) from her sources as possible into her imaginative design.

Why was it important for Wertenbaker to incorporate into her play details pertaining to Eberhardt's life that audience members, most likely not familiar with Isabelle Eberhardt at all, would not be able to recognize? The simple answer is that such details are the imaginative counters with which Wertenbaker creates her play; and, too, they help

her to produce a somewhat authentic sense of time and place. The more complicated answer has to do with the particular uses, pleasures, and problems of historical drama.

When a play dramatizes the life of a well-known person (Shaw's *Julius Caesar* or *St. Joan*, Osborne's *Luther*, Gems's *Piaf*), it is inevitable that most audience members will engage in some form of comparison between the dramatic figure and the historical figure as he or she is otherwise, however vaguely, known to them.⁶ Such comparison informs the audience's understanding of the contemporary significance of the play they are watching and is an important part of the pleasure of reception of a historical play. The audience may take pleasure in finding resemblances between the dramatic figure and what they had expected or, more piquantly, in observing meaningful, perhaps surprising, differences (though careless or pointless discrepancies, if noted, can also cause annoyance). In the case of a less familiar figure like Isabelle Eberhardt, however, the dramatic character is likely the only one many audience members will know. It should not, then, matter if such a protagonist is "real" or not. Yet it obviously does. No critic writes about *New Anatomies* without mentioning, however briefly, its historical genesis. Theatre companies, too, are at pains to ensure that their audiences know that the play is based on a "real" person. The internet publicity blurb for a recent production of *New Anatomies* in Chicago, for example, began, "Based on a true story ...," and the theatre company provided an account of the historical Isabelle Eberhardt's life on sheets of paper hanging on the lobby wall.⁷

Theatre directors assume, at least, that knowing that a play is historical will enhance the audience's pleasure in watching it and very possibly that the public will be more willing to see a new or little-known play if they are told that it is based on something that really happened. Producers of television docudramas certainly make such assumptions. Docudramas, indeed, while sometimes based on last year's headlines, often, like *New Anatomies*, dramatize unusual events in the lives of people the audience has otherwise never heard of ("The Jane Smith Story"). The appeal of such dramas is partly voyeuristic,

inviting particularly *Schadenfreude*, pity, or admiration. Their appeal seems to be partly attributable also to a distrust of fiction. Where Aristotle, stressing logical development in his discussion of both tragedy and epic, preferred “[p]robable impossibilities” to “improbable possibilities” (68), contemporary audiences accept sensational improbabilities in the plot of a docudrama (that they might well find unacceptable in a fictional drama) because they know that such improbable events occurred in real life (and, again as Aristotle reminds us, “what has happened is obviously possible” [44]). Documentation (that is, that the events of the play have been or can be documented from the historical record), rather than plausibility or dramatic necessity, satisfies the audience of the play’s verisimilitude and, concomitantly, of its truth as an interpretation of human experience.

The importance of the historicity of *New Anatomies* to Wertenbaker herself, to critics, to theatre directors, and, putatively, to audiences, can be explained to some extent as I have attempted to explain the appeal of docudramas. Part of the fascination of *New Anatomies* is that a historical woman at the turn of the last century “really” engaged in adventures that question many of our definitions of self and that would seem to make her our contemporary, or actually able to do things that we can no longer do, to engage in adventures that turn our contemporary media-based assumptions about the role of women in Islam, for example, on their head. If Wertenbaker had made up an Isabelle Eberhardt without benefit of a historical prototype, the character might well have seemed improbable and her story dismissable as both an Orientalist and a feminist fantasy. Knowing that Isabelle is a historical figure prevents this kind of skepticism and frees the audience to reflect in an open-minded way on the relevance of her experiences to their own lives and to the politics of the twenty-first century.

Knowing that Isabelle is historical might also, however, lead audiences unable to make the comparison to forget that the Isabelle they are watching is first and foremost a dramatic character and to accept Wertenbaker’s version of her life too uncritically. Docudramas, such as *Saving Jessica Lynch* (about the American soldier rescued from an

Iraqi hospital during the recent war), in fact, typically employ a realistic dramaturgy that encourages such uncritical acceptance of the verisimilitude of their content. Wertenbaker avoids this kind of dishonesty to a great extent by employing a Brechtian dramaturgy common to avant-garde political-historical plays of the late-twentieth century. The dramaturgy of *New Anatomies* ostends the performedness of the history the audience is watching (for example, the actors remain on stage throughout the play, changing costumes in front of the audience) and the attitude adopted towards it by both dramatist and cross-dressed actresses.⁸

Nonetheless, an ethical question remains. And it is a question that takes on political significance as well, given the changed climate of reception for Wertenbaker's play. Though Wertenbaker remains fairly faithful to many of the circumstances of Isabelle Eberhardt's life and obviously has great admiration for her protagonist, like all previous and subsequent commentators, she, unsurprisingly, remakes Isabelle's story for her own purposes. But in doing so, she distorts Eberhardt's life in ways that her audience will not be able to evaluate, as they might in the case of a well-known historical figure. (Perhaps, to offer another answer to a question I asked earlier in this essay, Wertenbaker's incorporation of so many apparently insignificant details from Eberhardt's biography is a form of compensation for all that she has changed and omitted.) Ironically, Wertenbaker includes in *New Anatomies* a critique of just such forms of exploitative reconstruction. She shows how Isabelle's personal quest for sexual and spiritual fulfillment is constructed as political behavior by both the French authorities in Algeria (whether they oppose or wish to use her) and also by the radical cross-dressed women in the Parisian salon, who assume that her Arab "clothes" are a "costume." Even more critically, Séverine, presented in the play as Isabelle's biographer and in some sense standing in, as Ryan Claycomb points out, for Wertenbaker the biographical dramatist, is dangerously eager to make use of Isabelle's journals (538). Her exit "*arm in arm*" (57) with the colonialist officer Lyautey at the end of the play reinforces the parallel between the two

forms of exploitation. Like Lyautey, the Parisian women, and in particular Séverine, Wertebaker, too, though she recognizes the dangers, appropriates Isabelle Eberhardt, politicizing what was to Eberhardt herself intensely personal (her cross-dressing as an Arab man). In doing so, Wertebaker creates a play that speaks to Western feminist and nationalist concerns of the 1980s but fails to address some of the things that mattered most to Si Mahmoud—and that matter again even more urgently to audiences viewing her life in the twenty-first century.

Obviously Wertebaker was not clairvoyant. One can write even historical plays only in terms of the time in which one is living. The relative flatness of the scenes involving Isabelle's conventionally stereotyped Muslim friends may well be more disturbing today than when the play was first performed. For if there is no such thing as unmediated history, equally there is no such thing as an unmediated play text. The text is mediated through successive performances. And in the case of a history play, the dramatist's chosen interpretation of historical events or of a historical character is mediated, too, by the audience's own knowledge and understanding of history that may over time transcend or at least vary from the dramatist's own at the time of writing the play. Such a change has certainly occurred in audiences' understanding of European-Arab (or American-Arab) relations since Wertebaker wrote *New Anatomies*.

The play's first production by the Women's Theatre Group in 1981 was fairly favorably received by critics. Though one reviewer found the desert scenes the least satisfactory in the play, commenting that "[t]he dislocation between the mind of that [Arab] world and the mind of western civilisation is both the core of the drama and its principal weakness" (Carne 513), her objection was primarily aesthetic. The desert scenes received mixed reviews in a revival of the play by Man in the Moon Theatre in London in 1990. One critic found that, despite the Arab characters' "spaghetti-Western accents," the visual and olfactory effects (herbal cigarettes) of the desert scenes created "a plausible and exotic mystery" (Wright 325); another critic,

less complimentary, complained that "the turbans and jellabiyas give an impression of a group of children let loose on a dressing up box" (Bayley 324). Both assessments suggest that the director's efforts to enliven Wertenbaker's Arabic scenes were patronizing though not a cause for political alarm. In Foreground Theatre's production of *New Anatomies* in Chicago in 2003 the Arabic scenes seemed, to me at least, embarrassingly bland. In this recent production the blandness represented not only an aesthetic failure, but a missed opportunity to address contemporary concerns about relations between Westerners and Arabs, even though such concerns are only incidental to Wertenbaker's play.

The problem for any contemporary production certainly begins with the stereotypes of Arab characters in the play text. In her own writing Eberhardt fails to document her friends in any detail, but Wertenbaker goes even further towards erasing them by omitting from her play Eberhardt's husband (even though marrying someone from another culture is one of the most obvious and common forms of transcultural accommodation) and by her use of cross-casting, which emphasizes that the Arab characters are chiefly props in Isabelle's story. It is, however, possible to imagine a production of *New Anatomies* that reinvents Isabelle's Muslim friends in a way that is more meaningful for the twenty-first century. Such a production might draw on additional documentary sources, either from Eberhardt's own day or from our own, in order to comment in the manner of Brecht on the play's depiction of East-West relations; or it might extend Wertenbaker's use of Brechtian theatrical conventions in more pluralistic ways. For example, Maya Roth suggests that "appropriations and erasures of Arabic culture" might be avoided in performance by employing "a multiracial, multi-ethnic cast, visibly *different* (women) performers performing racial, cultural, and gendered crossings" ("Opening" 85).⁹ Such a production might take its cue from Bou Saadi's caricature of the European stereotype of himself. "It's best to pretend you're stupid and keep laughing" (33), he explains to Isabelle. Like Isabelle, Bou Saadi performs an identity. But where Isabelle seeks to perform what

she takes to be her true self, Bou Saadi's comic performance is an act of political resistance. The different kinds of performance in Wertebaker's play suggest a way forward for future theatrical reinventions of *New Anatomies* and, perhaps, a new way back to the historical Isabelle Eberhardt.

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NOTES

¹Carlson notes Wertebaker's concern in all of her plays with "the problems and triumphs of living in a world of porous cultures and shifting identities" (134).

²Information about Isabelle Eberhardt is taken from Clancy-Smith, Hamdy, Kobak, and Rice.

³Peacock, *Radical Stages* 164-67; Palmer, *The Contemporary British History Play* 152-54.

⁴Quotations from *New Anatomies* are taken from *Timberlake Wertebaker: Plays 1*.

⁵Neither Lindenberger nor Rokem in their important books on historical drama deal with the question of multiple sources available to the dramatist and the reconstructions that have already taken place in the historiography. Rokem does note that historiographical works may be governed by formal considerations of their own (12).

⁶Lindenberger comments on the "common-sense" approach to historical drama: "our first notion in reflecting about a history play is not to view it as an imaginative construct in its own right but to ask how it deals with its historical materials" (3). He does not, however, consider the case of a little-known protagonist whom the audience cannot compare with her historical counterpart.

⁷*New Anatomies* was performed by Foreground Theatre Company at the Athenaeum Theatre, Chicago, 3-31 May 2003. [Unfortunately, the website containing the publicity blurb on <<http://entertainment.metromix.chicagotribune.com>> is no longer available.]

⁸Both Lindenberger (17-18) and Rokem (8-9) note the importance of Brechtian dramaturgy for contemporary historical drama. See also Reinelt, *After Brecht: British Epic Theater*. Claycomb comments that "many staged feminist biographies show the process of representing a life while they present the life itself" (525-26).

⁹The first production of *New Anatomies* by the Women's Theatre Group at the Edinburgh Festival in 1981 gestured towards this kind of multiculturalism in that Isabelle was played by an Anglo-Arab actress (Roth, "Engaging Cultural Translations" 160).

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