

SWORD DANCE OF ZAYNAB:

Woman Warrior

by

Tom Lysaght
(310 472-5538)

"SWORD DANCE OF ZAYNAB: Woman Warrior"

– a Dramatic Dance

[Soft, melodic MUSIC. An ACTRESS with long hair enters in a long flowing gown. She sways gently to the MUSIC. As the MUSIC take possession of her, she dances in gentle, slow movements. Brief tableau.]

[A NARRATOR enters. He stands off to one side at a podium. With head turned, he watches the ACTRESS dancing. MUSIC stops. As he turns and addresses the audience, the Actress continues to sway gently.]

NARRATOR

In 1850, while plots were hatching to bring the Báb to Tabriz to be executed, Bahá'ís throughout Persia were being persecuted. In Zanján, a city halfway between Tihiran and Tabriz, 3000 Bábí men, women, and children were forced to take refuge in an old fort in order to defend themselves. Government troops then attacked the fort.

[The Actress freezes, clasping her hands in front of her in fright or dismay.]

Hujjat, a former Muslim mullá, a favorite of the Shah, had renounced position and privilege to become a fearless Bábí. It was Hujjat who assumed leadership of the 3000 Bábí under attack in the dilapidated old fort.

[HUJJAT enters. The actor wears a gown or tunic and sports a bandana tied across his forehead. Other than having a sword tucked into his belt, no attempt should be made to imitate Persian costume.]

[HUJJAT comes down to the lip of the stage. With one hand on his hip and the other hand on the hilt of his sword, he looks out into the audience as if surveying the enemy assault.]

NOTE: NARRATOR may double as HUJJAT.

NARRATOR (cont'd)

Under Hujjat's leadership, the Bábís resisted the fierce assaults of the troops. For six months, the siege continued.

[Still surveying the audience,
Hujjat crosses the stage.]

Without food supplies, the Bábís were forced to eat shoe leather.

[A dismayed HUJJAT re-crosses the stage.
When he assumes position at his former
post, the ACTRESS moves. She raises
a hand to her head in consternation.]

NARRATOR (cont'd)

One of the Bábí women became so dismayed when she saw the suffering of her fellow believers, she decided to help the Bábí men defending the besieged women and children. She disguised herself in men's clothing.

[The ACTRESS tucks her hair under a cap.
She ties up her long, flowing garment at
her waist. She retrieves a sword upstage
and becomes ZAYNAB.]

NARRATOR (cont'd)

Putting on a tunic and headdress like those worn by the Bábí men, a young girl named Zaynab cut off her long locks, seized a sword and shield, and introduced herself into their ranks. She leapt forward to take her post at the barricade.

[ZAYNAB, brandishing her sword, springs
forward to the lip of the stage. HUJJAT
turns and eyes her curiously.]

NARRATOR (cont'd)

No one suspected the brave warrior was a woman. When the enemy charged, she drew her sword, and raising a cry...

ZAYNAB
(shouting out)

Yá Sáhibu'z-Zamán!

NARRATOR

"O Lord of the Age!"

[While the NARRATOR speaks, ZAYNAB swings and thrusts her sword, as she spins across the stage.]

NARRATOR (cont'd)

She flung herself upon the forces arrayed against the Bábís. Overwhelmed with despair at the sight of her fierceness, the enemy troops abandoned their barricade and fled in disgraceful rout before her.

[ZAYNAB freezes. With legs spread wide, she stands with arms crossed, looking out over audience.]

Hujjat, who was watching the movement of the enemy from the ramparts, recognized her as a local Bábí girl. Marveling at her bravery, he ordered his men to bid her return to the fort.

[HUJJAT turns. ZAYNAB comes forward to meet him. She takes a knee before him.]

HUJJAT

Not a single man has shown the courage which you have demonstrated today. What is your name? What impelled you to disguise yourself as a man?

ZAYNAB
(pulls off cap; hair tumbles out)

My name is Zaynab. Upon seeing the sufferings of my fellow Bábís, my heart broke in two. An inner urge compelled me to action. Forgive me, but...
(bows head)

HUJJAT

Speak freely.

ZAYNAB

I feared you would deny me, as a girl, from throwing in my lot with my male companions.

HUJJAT

Ah, you are that same Zaynab then, who volunteered some weeks ago to join our forces?

ZAYNAB
(bows head again)

The same. I am. But –
(looks up)

I can assure you, that no one else has recognized me. You alone know my secret – that I am a woman. I beg you – in the name of the Blessed Báb – do not deny me the one desire of my life.

HUJJAT

What is the one desire of your life?

ZAYNAB

To give my life – for the Bab.

[HUJJAT turns away and looks up.
Silence.
He turns back to the kneeling ZAYNAB
and takes her sword. ZAYNAB lowers
her head in dismay. HUJJAT rests a
comforting hand on her shoulder.]

HUJJAT

Your devotion has deeply touched me. You can be assured of my fervent prayers.

[Head still lowered, ZAYNAB starts to rise, but Hujjat touches her shoulder with her sword, keeping her on one knee.]

HUJJAT (cont'd)

I name you after the ancient warrior hero, Rustam...
(taps her other shoulder
with sword)

... and after the Commander of the Faithful, Alí. Zaynab has now become Rustam-Alí. This is the Day of Resurrection...
(raises her to her feet)

...the day of transformation. Not by their outward appearance, not by their gender, but by their character and conviction, will God's people in this Day be judged. Though but a youth of tender age and of little experience, you as a maiden have displayed a fervor and faith that few men could ever hope to surpass.

[HUJJAT hands ZAYNAB her sword.
Her face brightens. She turns to
run off and HUJJAT restrains her.]

HUJJAT (cont'd)

But I warn you: not to exceed the bounds our Faith has
imposed upon us. We are called upon to defend our lives; not
to wage holy war or to engage in revenge.

[Zaynab places a hand on her breast and
bows. With a skip and a bound, she turns
and, brandishing her sword, races across
the stage. She freezes in a martial pose.
As the NARRATOR speaks, she moves in
stylized, slow motion.]

NARRATOR

For a period of no less than five months, that youth
continued to withstand the onslaught of the fanatical enemy.
Disdainful of food and sleep, she toiled with fevered
devotion for the Cause she loved so much. Her audacity and
daring quickened many Bábís who wavered, thus encouraging
them to do their part. The sword she wielded remained, for
the five-month period, continuously by her side. In her brief
intervals of sleep she could be seen with her head resting
upon it; her shield serving as cover for her body. Every
male Bábí defender was assigned a particular post; Zaynab
alone was given free rein to move in whatever direction she
pleased. Always in the thick of the turmoil that raged around
her, Zaynab was ever ready to rush to the rescue of whatever
flank was threatened, to assist any comrade who needed
encouragement or support. Soon the enemy came to dread her
influence and to tremble at her approach; even after they
discovered that she was a girl.

(beat)

One day, witnessing her companions enveloped by the enemy
forces, Zaynab rushed to Hujjat, imploring his permission to
race to their assistance.

[In real time ZAYNAB races downstage.
She takes a knee before HUJJAT. He rests
a loving hand on her shoulder and nods
his assent. She jumps up and starts to
rush off; then stops and turns.]

ZAYNAB
(softly)

My life, I feel, is nearing its end. I myself may soon fall
beneath the sword of the enemy. I beg of you, please...
(bows head)

forgive my trespasses.
(looks up)

I know your prayers are very powerful. Would you intercede
with our Lord for me?

HUJJAT

Certainly.

ZAYNAB

Would you ask that the Blessed Báb might accept my life as a
sacrifice – for our beloved Faith?

[HUJJAT looks away, too moved to speak.
ZAYNAB accepts his silence as assent
and jumps up. HUJJAT turns to speak,
but ZAYNAB is gone. As he raises his
hand, she raises across the stage and
lets out a cry.]

ZAYNAB (cont'd)

Yá Sáhibu'z-Zamán!
(brandishes her sword)

Why befoul the fair name of Islam with your wicked deeds?
(spins and weaves)

If you be speakers of truth, why cowardly flee from our face?

[Zaynab's Dance. Whether in stylized
pantomime or in real time, ZAYNAB
performs her Sword Dance.
HUJJAT circles the perimeter of the
stage, as if observing her exploits]

NARRATOR

Zaynab ran to the barricades which the enemy had erected.
The shrill sound of her voice struck terror into the hearts
of the enemy. She routed the troops guarding the first
barricade. She routed the troops guarding the second
barricade. She routed the troops guarding the third

NARRATOR (cont'd)

barricade, and was engaged in overcoming the fourth
barricade, when beneath a shower of bullets, she dropped
dead to the ground.

[Zaynab sinks to her knees; head up.
Slowly, with her sword lying flat on
both palms, she raises it, as if
offering her sacrifice to her Lord.]

NARRATOR (cont'd)

Not a single voice among the government troops dared mock
Zaynab's fate nor call into question her chastity. They
recognized – even if only dimly – the sublimity of her
station. Such was her devotion that after her death, no less
than twenty women of her acquaintance embraced the Cause of
the Báb. To them she had ceased to be the peasant girl they
had once known; she had become the living embodiment of the
noblest principles of human conduct, a personification the
transforming power of the New Day of God.

[LIGHTS fade on NARRATOR.
LIGHTS illumine ZAYNAB.
HUJJAT comes up behind her.
He lifts the sword from her
upraised hands. Holding it on his
outstretched palms, he comes
downstage and sets it on the floor.]

HUJJAT

"Know thou that we have annulled the rule of the sword," now
writes Bahá'u'lláh, "as an aid to Our Cause, and substituteth
for it the power born of the utterance of men."¹

(turns to audience left)

"Aid ye your Lord with the sword of wisdom and of
utterance."²

[ZAYNAB rises to her feet and comes
downstage. She addresses the audience.]

ZAYNAB

(quoting Bahá'u'lláh)

"Thou art even as a finely tempered sword concealed in the
darkness of its sheath and its value hidden from the
artificer's knowledge. Wherefore come forth from the sheath
of self and desire that thy worth may be made resplendent and
manifest unto all the world."³

(turns to audience right)

ZAYNAB (cont'd)

"Aid ye your Lord with the sword of wisdom and of utterance."²

HUJJAT

"O people of Bahá!..."

ZAYNAB

"...Subdue the citadels of men's hearts with the swords of wisdom and of utterance."⁴

[Lights fade.]

THE END

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1. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 303
 2. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 296
 3. Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* #72P
 4. Bahá'u'lláh, *ESW* 55