

Ibrahim Alkazi

Founder Director of National School of Drama

'I don't believe i'll simply die'

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Ibrahim Alkazi is the founder director of National School of Drama. He is also a gallerist, a collector and a patron of the arts.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I do not think it is a state in which one exists. It is an aspiration, a state of being that one strives for. It only comes with a tremendous amount of self-questioning and experiencing the world at all its various levels, in all its manifestations — whether human beings, nations, or cultures. It is something I constantly question since it also has to do with the values I strive to live by, knowing I cannot live up to them, as I often feel contaminated by the world, descending to a level I would wish to transcend.

So how does spirituality manifest in your daily life?

I am a Muslim and I say my prayers. My father was an Arab from Saudi Arabia and my mother was from Kuwait, so naturally Islam has been a long tradition in the family. It is also about the values I got from the way my parents conducted their lives.

Do you believe you are guided and protected by a superior force?

It is a very strong element of the Islamic faith. It is one of the ways God works the patterns of your life. Not everything that comes your way comes because of your own volition.

Do you believe you have a special purpose in this life?

Of course there is a purpose. For me, it has been about a commitment to the work of art. I felt that plays should not be kept inert on bookshelves but rather be given a life of their own. I would recreate them through my imagination and be a conduit for them to become part of the audience's imagination and experience. I also felt that plays should reach beyond the walls of the theatre. The Mahabharata for instance, should not be cloistered among so-called intellectuals who read all sorts of fancy ideas into it that are not there, and who do not understand its values. It should be shared with the whole of mankind. And so I would always lead two lives: my daily "wordly" life with its trials and tribulations, and the life of my characters. Unless you completely become those characters, you cannot achieve much. And so I never looked at art with a capital A, it always was a complete part of life.

It almost sounds like a religious dedication to your work?

Indeed, all I just described is religion, it is spirituality. Basically, I feel that religion is about using the talents God has given me in a manner which is befitting me, both in terms of the material I am using, the audience I am sharing it with, and the other human beings who bring it alive on stage. I have a responsibility towards them all. Every play is the result of a conflict and you must understand its nodes of contention, give them a dramatic form and rhythm, like a piece of music. Besides, as you work with a tremendous range of material and people, it becomes a liberating experience, as you imbibe such rich and different realities. It requires an imagination of emotions and feelings rather than of ideas and dreams. And ultimately, it is what makes me feel so alive.

What have been your spiritual inspirations?

My parents were deeply steeped in the values carried by the Muslim religion, with a certain sense of discipline, an insistence on equality and other such ways of looking at life. As an orphan from Saudi Arabia, my father wanted his children to be aware of his culture, especially through faith. But he did not believe in rituals and had been quite bruised by the orthodox views of Islam. He thought it was a mockery of true Islam as all the unimportant things were emphasized.

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you like to be reincarnated as?

Exactly myself, because one life term is not enough. I do not feel eighty-four years' old and when people remind me of my age, it comes as a shock. Besides, I do not believe I will simply die. I have no proof of some kind of resurrection, but if Christ had one, why not me?

If there was one question you could ask god, what would it be?

No matter what I could think of, I am sure God would say "who the hell are you to ask all those silly questions? Go and find out for yourself!"

What is your idea of happiness?

I see it as both a constant curiosity and a certain maturity required to face life. Rather than any good meal, amazing love affair or tremendous wealth, it is about taking every experience to its deepest end, and as much as possible, without vanity. Since I was put through a creative discipline which opened a whole endless world to me, happiness is about exploring ever more, better and better, getting rid of some of the fixed notions I may have had, continuously opening up and growing. I get a tremendous thrill from it all, and it has been the source of my energy.

Happiness is also about sharing with others. Companionship is about seeing people through their vicissitudes and sharing them – otherwise you are not really a human being.