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A Very Long Vigil

International art project reinvents classic survival story

By Valerie Howes

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The sun is rising over Sydney, Australia, as Barbara Campbell devours the morning papers. She lingers over Middle East stories. As she reads about the Israeli PM's efforts to prep his Italian counterpart for a joint press conference, the words "please say this?" jump out at her. Campbell picks up her paintbrush and paints those three words in watercolours. She posts the phrase and news story online. Writers across the globe will then respond to or incorporate the prompt phrase in short fiction narratives of 1001 words or less. In an updated version of *Arabian Nights*, Campbell appears online at sunset and recites one of those writer's tales in a live webcast. For 543 days, she has made this her routine: up at dawn; scour the papers; paint a prompt; post; await responses; pick a submission; recount a story at sunset. She will continue in this way each day until the project has run its course of 1001 nights.

Campbell's daily postings on the "[1001 nights cast](#)" website have inspired a kaleidoscope of responses. By the project's midway point in November 2006, 133 writers had contributed from a dozen countries including Australia, France, Columbia, Malaysia, and Israel. The "1001 nights cast" archives now burst with narratives, letters, dialogues and stream-of-consciousness diatribes—stories often set in far-flung destinations. And Campbell moves from city to city, country to country, as the project progresses—entering new time zones and seeking out new writers of different backgrounds and sensibilities.

Telling the stories of strangers is essential to this project, because it is inspired by the centuries-old Middle Eastern epic classic, *Arabian Nights*. Originally, the *Arabian Nights* stories—including famous tales such as *Aladdin* and *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*—were woven and passed on orally by travellers and merchants making their way along the Chinese Silk Route. Over time, those stories were assigned to paper within an organising narrative framework.

Basically, in *Arabian Nights*, a young woman Scheherazade is married to King Sharyhar, who habitually weds and beds virgins, before having them executed the morning after. To delay her untimely demise, Scheherazade tells Sharyhar a story on their wedding night, ending on a cliffhanger that keeps him wanting more the next evening. She continues telling him stories in this way at sunset for 1001 nights. Eventually Sharyhar softens and allows her to live.

To symbolize the act of giving voice to the stories of others, Campbell wears a specially crafted tongue stud for her "1001 nights cast" webcasts, bearing the number of each new performance. With a flick of the tongue, she shows it to the webcam before reading. "I wanted to have the tongue stud," she explains, "to work with a foreign body in my tongue, which during the performance, has to be accommodated and worked around. It's a physical representation of what I'm doing when I tell other people's stories."

Unlike in theatre, where the performer's whole body is visible to the audience, in these webcasts, all you see is Campbell's mouth—in extreme close-up. Campbell's desire is to challenge the notion of the Middle East as some kind of a visual spectacle, which is how she considers it to be portrayed in daily news broadcasts. She explains, "I conceived that live video frame as a theatre of the mouth, in opposition to the way the West sees the Middle East, as a theatre of the eye." She adds that the Middle East often projects itself in a very visual way too, "through costuming, through religious attire."

Writers crafting a story for "1001 nights cast" must commit the better part of a day to the task. As the ink and adrenaline flow, the experience can be challenging and intense, but people still want to do it for their own unique reasons. Van Waffle from Guelph Ontario says:

"At first I wanted to tie more frequently into the theme of events in the Middle East, but found I was not aware enough of the cultures or current events. I live in a relatively safe part of the world. However, as a queer writer who went through adolescence in a small town in the 1970s, I have held burning inner stories that I believed were unworthy or unsafe to tell. '1001 nights cast' is one of the first places where I've presented threads from my own life, in fiction, to a public audience. In finding my own freedom as a writer, I also stand for people subject to violence, injustice and censorship."

During the conflict this summer in Lebanon, Campbell notes that "more people were directed to expressing some kind of reaction to that event rather than letting their stories be completely fictional and unrelated." The 2005 London bombings, too, inspired a run of stories on "the enemy within."

Helen Grace, who lives in Hong Kong, contributed after meeting Barbara Campbell in Paris. Already familiar with the performance artist's past work, Grace was inspired by how Campbell had developed this project in a way that "works through grief and links to the world beyond the personal to meaningfully deal with tragedies in the Middle East on a much larger scale."

The personal tragedy that Grace alludes to is the accidental death of Campbell's husband a few years prior to the project. Devastated, Campbell needed to find a path to the future beyond that loss. She had long been intrigued by the heroine of *Arabian Nights*, but only after her husband's death did she want to incorporate the character into her performance art. "I took on her survival story and adapted it so that I could progress forward," says Campbell. "It's been part of a healing process for me, but I wanted it to be more than that."

The "1001 nights cast" project has now passed the halfway point, and Campbell's determination to stick to her rigid daily routine is stronger than ever. "Someone used the word vigil for what I do, and I thought, yes, I'm keeping vigil over things in the Middle East and hopefully others are too because of the project. It's not because I have a solution—and that's not what I'm after. How could I have a solution to all the troubles of the Middle East? It's important to keep vigil, just to maintain focus, and I think that things do fall apart when attention isn't paid."

Since the project began on June 21, 2005, no weapons of mass destruction have been discovered in Iraq, and Saddam Hussein is to be hung for genocide. Rafic Hariri, the former prime minister of Lebanon, has been assassinated, and Syria's involvement pointed to and denied. The Hamas have won elections in Palestine leading to a US and Israeli economic blockade. In Israel, the new Kadima party has won the elections as Ariel Sharon lies in a coma. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has come to power in Iran and has been denying sinister nuclear intentions ever since. The five-week Israeli/Hezbollah conflict has left cluster bombs lying unexploded in the fields of Southern Lebanon. Most recently, the streets of Beirut have resounded with cries of anti-government protest.

At heart, the "1001 nights cast" project serves as a purposeful meditation. As Campbell says in a thank you letter to the 1001 nights cast writers at the halfway-point: "The world turns. The sun goes up; the sun goes down. You are creating something—something both small and significant—out of horror and frustration."

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