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Cast of Swim Team. Photo by Joseph Hammond.

**Toronto, Ontario**

**Diana Manole** reviews *Swim Team* (<http://summerworks.ca/artists/swim-team/>), *Nowadays Theatre's* co-production with *Alma Matters Productions* (<http://www.sarahmarchand.com/company-history.html>), as part of the 2018 *SummerWorks Lab*:

Have you ever imagined yourself swimming for 20 km, and doing that while wearing a six-kilogram bathing suit? This is exactly what Iranian swimmer Elham Asghari did in September 2013, when pictures and YouTube clips of her stirred international protests in Western media. Her custom-made loose-fitting swimsuit included a headscarf, yet the Iranian Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs refused to register her alleged new swimming record in the Caspian Sea because her outfit was considered too revealing. Women's participation in organized sports at home and abroad has become a contentious matter in the Islamic Republic of Iran after the 1979 revolution. In *Swim Team* by Iranian award-winning and internationally-renowned director and playwright Jaber Ramezani, swimming has also become a central metaphor of women's fight for equality. Its first Canadian production (produced by *Nowadays Theatre* in collaboration with *Alma Matters Productions*) is part of the 2018 *SummerWorks Lab* in Toronto, with each performance followed by a Q&A session to help the artists further develop it. Under the direction of Aida

Keykhaii, the entire creative team puts together a show with exquisite symbolic moments and a gripping plea for women's rights, while Mohammad Yaghoubi's dramaturgy makes the play accessible for Canadian audiences.



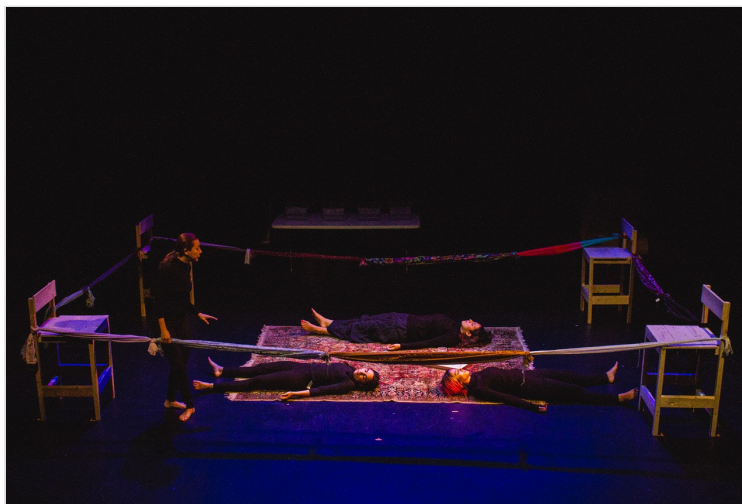
Cast of Swim Team. Photo by Joseph Hammon.

Swimming coach Roya (Banafsheh Taherian) trains three young women – Lili (Parya Tahsini), Katy (Sarah Saberi), and Nari (Tina Bararian) – to take part in the national championship. They are in the desert, a place paradoxically called “River Valley,” where water must be purchased at the only store in town. Roya decides, “We will practice with no water, with hypothetical water,” and so they do. In its climactic scene, the play blurs the distinction between reality and illusion: Lili drowns while the others keep screaming “Stop it! There is no water! This is an imaginary pool!” The coach's final soliloquy changes the entire play's meaning through a reversal that nears classical Greek

tragedy. Comparing herself to Michael Phelps, the play's leitmotiv as a symbol of a fully successful Western male swimmer, Roya reveals that everything, including the girls, have been only her fantasy.

Keykhaii explains during the Q&A that the production of *Swim Team* in Iran, directed by playwright Ramezani, had to observe the country's religious rules. Female actors wore the hijab at all times, and no dances or songs were included in the show. The observance of these laws in the public space of the theatre ultimately contradicted reality, because women are able to act freely in the privacy of their homes. This inspired Keykhaii to direct the show in Canada, where she was able to fully exercise her artistic freedom. From a trans/intercultural perspective, the Toronto production of *Swim Team* ironically provides its multicultural audiences with a more realistic depiction of Persian women's daily life. When the four women take off their hijabs and chadors (traditional black Islamic attire) after entering Roya's living room, when they sing, dance and laugh, their actions resignify the stage not only as home, but also as a space of shared intimacy between performers and the audience.

An award-winning actor and director in Iran, *Swim Team* is Kaykhaii's first show directed in English, for which she also designed set, costumes, and sound. Her ability to create multilayered performance signs that complement the



Cast of *Swim Team*. Photo by Joseph Hammond.

spoken lines proves yet again that theatre does not have to observe naturalism and that cultural diversity enriches Canadian theatre. *Swim Team* is also the first theatre show in English for Iranian-born actor Taherian. In *Roya*, she foreshadows the character's tragedy through restrained gestures, permanently sad glances, and the emotional depth of her speech. The show's further development could help the three younger actors provide more subtext to their nuanced character portrayal. Yet, their physical performance is impressive and fully supports Kaykhaii's usage of reality versus imagination to articulate the show's visual metaphor and heighten the play's message. Their occasional exchanges in Farsi are symbolic reminders of where the play takes place, but need to be integrated into these scenes' realistic style. As English serves as a necessary convention in a play performed in translation, it is this author's belief that the audience's suspension of linguistic disbelief must be preserved.



Cast of *Swim Team*. Photo by Joseph Hammond

Lili, Katy, and Nari start by doing breathing exercises in clear plastic bins full of actual water, which allow the audience to see their faces. Like freedom, water can only exist in small quantities and under

continuous surveillance

in both the play's desert landscape and oppressive society. A scene in which Roya "builds" a pool in front of the audience, using chairs and long women's scarfs, is treated like a ritual. In contrast, during the numerous training sessions on the dry living room carpet her students embody the water in a surprising, but compelling, display of psychological realism: all gasp for air; get splashed when they take turns "diving"; Lili is genuinely terrified of water; and Katy even asks for permission to "dry off" with a cloth the edge of the "pool." The three young women's relationship to the imaginary water reads like a victory against oppression, but only until we understand that they are only the coach's "fantasy students" who shared with her a dream within a dream. The absence of water in the "fantasy pool" and even more so the death of "fantasy Lili" retroactively become symbols of the ultimate denial of freedom, of a dictatorship controlling even people's imagination and making them self-censor it.

The first Canadian staging of *Swim Team* is a beautiful show, as well as a daring political gesture during a time when Iranian women have intensified their fight for equality and human rights. In the Q&A, an audience member praised the show for reminding her of the relationship between imagination and social change. Both Ramezani's play and Nowadays Theatre's production are convincing proof of this. In the so-called "man's world," however, a woman may still be forced to feel powerless, even in her fantasies. So, what's next?!



**Diana Manole** (PhD) is a Romanian-Canadian scholar and print dramaturg, a Pushcart prize-nominated English-language poet, as well as an award-winning playwright and literary translator. She has published extensively in Canada, the US, and the UK, on post-colonial and post-communist theatre, exilic theatre, and intercultural performance. Her article, "Accented Actors: From Stage to Stages via a Convenience Store" (*Theatre Research in Canada*, 2015), was the first scholarly investigation of actors' immigrant accents in theatre and performance. She lives in Toronto and teaches at Trent University.

Reviewed by Ted Fox

Swim Team is a SummerWorks Lab presentation, as it is a work in development. It is a powerful metaphor for Iranian women's lives in the restrictive patriarchal society of post-revolutionary Iran.

Roya (Banafsheh Taherian) is a swimming coach who has moved to an apartment in an area where there is no water. She agrees to teach swimming to three young women: Lili (Parya Tahsini), Katy (Sarah Saberi) and Nari (Tina Bararian). All have aspirations to become champion swimmers. Only by using their imaginations can they achieve that goal.

When we first see them, they are wearing chadors-- large pieces of black cloth that wrap around their heads and upper bodies, leaving only their faces exposed. They have to wear these when outdoors.

They are attempting to move a sofa into the apartment that has a small doorway. The only furniture, at the back of the stage, is a table and four chairs.

Roya begins the training by having them submerge their heads in bowls of water on the tables, holding their breath and then coming up for air.

Stools are brought in. She creates a pool by extending ropes made of scarves around the living room carpet, running from one stool to another. One stool will serve as a diving board.

Using their imagination, these women become swimmers. They realistically simulate swimming movements from one side of the pool to the other, holding their breath, swimming, and coming up for air. So adept are they at physically simulating swimming I too actually see the water in the pool. They towel themselves when they come out.

There is a relaxed camaraderie and warmth between them. Normal everyday behaviour. One makes tea, and gets blankets for them as the room is cold.

One drowns. Her facial expressions, gasping for breath and going under are quite realistic. Roya is stunned by this, saying over and over that she does not understand, as the pool is not there, there is no water here, how could this have happened? There is a notice at the box office for this, saying "Warning: Simulated Drowning."

The others later wrap the chadors around their bodies and leave the apartment.

Well-acted and directed, Swim Team is a powerful evocation of how these women use the power of the imagination as a method of survival.

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