

Hakawati Freestyle

Laila Debs

I have a bone to pick with Eve. Not only did she deprive her partner of a rib and then entice him to pluck the fruit and eat it, but she also succeeded in using her female charm to plunge Noura al-Sakkaf and I into Hakawati Freestyle.

It all began past midnight in March 2006, in Dubai. Tired and dishevelled, Leila Mroueh (from now on referred to as Leila) and I emerged from the editing suite after many overnights working on a reality TV show, in pursuit of a hearty dinner. Leila attempted to lighten the mood and asked me the question of the century, “what I thought of television”. Oh, nothing beats the theater for me. Leila asks another question. Would I consider performing with *Arabise Me*? Perform what? I ask. Leila flatters me by saying I am a good storyteller and apparently have good comic skills. I would certainly say these skills are missing tonight because a piece of my Bresaola got stuck in my throat, and I was coughing the restaurant away.

Arabise Me is an event produced by Leila and her colleague, that was held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2006. Leila believes I only need to let my humour run its course. Umph! It’s that humour that Leila keeps referring to that is worrying me. However, I wasn’t going to let her down.

Right, Leila was already packing her trendy GAP bag to go and inform London of this new addition to the program, namely, a female *hakawati* in modern style. Things were moving too fast for my dead brain. I am no storyteller. I am not that great an actress, either. However, my friend, Noura, is a natural. I proposed (that) Leila contact Noura ...

Two days later, Leila succeeded with great difficulty and after a lot of persuasion, to get Noura’s consent, but there were conditions. First, it would

be a duo between the two of us; one of the “us”, of course, is me. Aaagh! We will battle over who tells better stories. Another aaaagh, Noura will win with hardly any challenge on my part. Secondly, she is not writing any scripts. Unless she is handed one immediately, she’s out. Noura’s terms were accepted. The event was scheduled to take place five months later. Our friends started booking their flights to London. It’s happening.

Our TV show in Dubai was over. Leila and I were back in London. Before we knew it, August was on our doorsteps. Noura continued to make her regular phone calls from Saudi Arabia to inquire about the script, and I constantly re-assured her that I would be working on one soon. That “soon” never arrived. Then one day, Noura called and gave Leila and I an ultimatum; she either receives the script now or she’s walking out. If Noura walks out, we would have no show. It’s time I pulled my act together. Eve, what’s wrong with taking the easy way out, quit?

What do we relate in our *Hakawati* performance? What do we call it? Obviously, we are not playing it the traditional way, so the title of Hakawati Freestyle was born. We knew we could always resort to *The Thousand and One Nights* when we reached an impasse. Well, we have reached the impasse. At that thought, Noura rang and eased my stress. She commented that the best storyteller on earth is Sheherazade. Noura added that she would like it if we went into the domain of the kitchen, as women usually gossip and tell tales whilst cleaning the lentils, plucking the spinach, and cracking the broad beans. Brilliant idea, I thought. Make the cooking ingredients reflect modern technology. We drafted the below.

Setting:

Noura working at her laptop. Laila engrossed in setting up the session.

LAILA DEBS: Traditional classic or freestyle?

NOURA AL-SAKKAF: Ummmh?

LAILA: I'm going to start from the very beginning, the *Nights*.

NOURA: Ah huh!

LAILA: Why shouldn't I? Do you know how it came to be?

NOURA: Look, I really don't know what you're on about. All I know is we're here to tell stories, *a la* make-believe *hakawati*. We don't have the usual coffee house backdrop, the round tables, the tea, the backgammon, the *hakawati* with his massive book, his cane, his stool and his dog, and certainly not the customers who are eager to hear a tale of heroic deeds which they already know by heart. And here you are babbling about starting from the beginning. Beginning of what?

LAILA: No need to get so worked up just because we have to change a bit or two.

NOURA: A bit or two? Listen to yourself. You may not have noticed but we are performing in a museum, in the Nehru India Room, to an audience who is not allowed to drink or eat anything due to health and safety reasons; we have just about half an hour to tell an abridged epic tale, and you want to go back to the classics, and excuse me, start from the very beginning. Well, you better hurry up cause you've just lost two minutes from your allotted time.

LAILA: You're upset.

NOURA: No I'm not upset, that's an understatement. I am fuming.

We were both fuming. We were running out of time, we had no script and we needed to perform in two weeks' time. We wished our friends would cancel their trip to London. Noura calls up to inform me she would be arriving in two days' time to sort out the mess I got both of us in. Thank God for that. Eve,

why can't you just take the short cut like men do?

Noura arrived, and the battle raged between the two of us. We decided to carry on with the script by developing the draft above. It ran as such:

LAILA: Would you feel better if you went first?

NOURA: You know what, just get on with your story.

LAILA: What's wrong with going back to the classics?

NOURA: Nothing ... That's precisely it ... classics, old, gone, finished, covered in cobweb.

LAILA: I bet you don't know the beginnings of the *Nights*.

NOURA: I do.

LAILA: You really don't know it, do you? Long ago, there lived a just king who commanded great armies. He left two sons; the elder, called King Shahriyar, and the younger, King Shahzaman. Both governed their kingdoms justly. Twenty years later, the older brother, Shahriyar, invited his younger brother, Shahzaman, to come visit him. King Shahzaman began immediate preparations for the journey. It so happened that, after setting off with his men, King Shahzaman realized that he had forgotten his brother's gift behind. He returned to his palace, unheralded, and upon entering his private chambers, he found his wife lying on a couch in the arms of one of their slaves.

NOURA: The lady prefers a slave to a king!!!

LAILA: At this sight, he drew his sword, killed them both and resumed his journey.

NOURA: Just like that!

LAILA: Upon arriving, Shahriyar noticed how distressed his younger brother looked. He organized a hunting party in his honour, hoping the sport would dispel his brother's bad mood. Shahzaman declined his brother's invitation, so Shahriyar went alone to the hunt.

NOURA: The loving older brother inherited the bigger chunk of his father's kingdom.

LAILA: While Shahzaman sat at one of the windows, he saw his brother's beautiful queen emerge with twenty slave girls and twenty male slaves, and they all made their way to the fountain. The queen then called Massood the slave to come to her. Promptly, this slave embraced the queen, and while smothering her with kisses ...

NOURA: (Strangely begins to pay attention to the story).

LAILA: As Shahzaman witnessed this spectacle, his gloom was lifted, thinking to himself that his misfortune was far lighter than that of his brother. When Shahriyar returned from the hunt, he was overjoyed to see the transformation in his brother's state. Upon inquiring about the cause, Shahzaman related the entire story about slaying his wife and the slave. As Shahriyar urged his brother to continue with the story, Shahzaman related what he had seen in his brother's garden that day. Shahriyar was alarmed, but he would not believe the reports unless he saw them with his own eyes. They agreed to pretend they were going on another hunting trip, but this time, remained behind.

NOURA: Oh dear, that went down very well. They were pretty simple in those days.

LAILA: The second hunting trip was organised, and this time Shahriyar hid, together with Shahzaman, and witnessed the scene exactly as his brother had described it. Half demented at the sight, Shahriyar suggested to his brother that they renounce their royal state and roam the world until they found out if any other king had ever met with such disgrace. They both left secretly and traveled many days until they arrived at a meadow by the seashore.

NOURA: Obviously, they could simply get up and go, why not, after all it was an inheritance, come easy...

LAILA: As they sat down to rest, the waves of the sea suddenly surged and foamed before them. Struck with terror, they climbed into a tree just as a *jinni*¹ of gigantic stature, carrying a chest on his head, waded to the shore and walked towards the same tree. The *jinni* opened the chest and took out a box which he also opened and from which rose a beautiful girl. The *jinni* seated the girl on the ground, rested his head

upon her knees and fell asleep. The girl suddenly lifted her head up and saw the two kings high in the tree. She made signs to them to come down. Of course, they pleaded with her to leave them alone. She threatened to wake up the *jinni* if they did not comply with her wishes. In fear, they both climbed down. The girl then ordered them to ...

NOURA: I have listened enough to this *hishek bishek, jinni minnee* crap that no longer has any relevance. Why do we want to keep telling those ridiculous stories that time itself has worn out?

Noura does not agree with the portrayal of women in the *Nights*. She wants her stories to be about real women, who are relevant to our times.

We improvised during our next two meetings, where I would pluck stories from the *Nights* and Noura would jump in with a story about real women who actually effected social change. This was done amid bickering battles between the two of us.

Only a week left. We both began to lose sleep over the deadline. We had to finish the script. An absolute ordeal, but we managed to do it. The following day, we met to rehearse it, and we realized that we had a disaster on our hands. We simply could not remember the lines. Script reading was inevitable, and we had to live with it. We parted that night in total disillusionment. Perhaps we should really call those friends and ask them to change their plans.

The performance day arrived. We entered the hall where we were to perform. Our performance time came, and suddenly, the hall filled up to near saturation. Where did all these people come from? Why are they all flocking to our event? There was no more time. The show had to begin, and this is how it was presented:

Setting:

Laila sitting on the platform, eagerly waiting for audience to settle down. Noura leaning against a column in the background drinking coffee, clearly not happy to be there.

LAILA: Ladies and gentle, gentlemen. I will start our story from the very beginning. Once upon

a time, king Shahrayar ruled an island between India and China. He was a truly great king, and his people loved him. But, all this bliss was soon to be shattered when, one day, he caught his wife in the arms of one of his slaves. Enraged, he ordered their execution. Believing all women to be likewise unfaithful, he resolved to marry a new virgin wife every night and to have her killed the following morning. This cruelty continued for some time, and the people who had once loved their monarch, raised one universal outcry against him. The grand Vizier was approached by his favourite daughter, the beautiful Scheherazade, who volunteered to become the next virgin wife of the king. Scheherazade, with the help of her younger sister, Dunyazade, designed a clever plan. The minute her marriage to the king was consummated, she left Shahrayar's bed and spent the rest of the night relating intriguing tales to her sister. When Scheherazade noticed the dawn of day, she stopped her storytelling and interrupted the tale with a cliffhanger. The insomniac king, captivated by the story and his burning desire to hear the ending, delayed Scheherazade's execution another day. And thus continued Scheherazade to succeed with her plan night after night for a thousand nights, and on the one thousand and first night, Sheherazade presented the king with their three sons, and they all lived happily ever after.

NOURA: Stop, stop. Just tell me, how did she manage to conceal three kids from her husband? Three times 9 equals 27, twenty seven months of this (makes a gesture around her stomach). Nobody should listen to this stuff anymore. Give me real stories with real people in them. Tell me about people who get things done.

LAILA: What, you're mocking the *Nights*?

NOURA: I'm not mocking it I'm just fed up with these fanciful tales of *jinnis* and flying carpets and magical lamps and ...

LAILA: It's fantasy, stories that give flight to the imagination.

NOURA: Imagination, imagination!!!! Scheherazade spent three years telling a mass murderer stories instead of trying the bastard for murder. Take Doria Shafik, for example. She was an Egyptian feminist,

poet, publisher, and a political activist who, during the 1940s, burst onto the public stage in Egypt, openly challenging every social, cultural, and legal barrier that she viewed as being oppressive to women. She and a group of women stormed the House of Parliament, and for four hours, demonstrated before finally being received by the vice president of the Chamber of Deputies and extracting from the senate a verbal promise that parliament would immediately address the women's demands. She believed that no one would deliver freedom to women, except woman herself. She went on hunger strikes for her cause. She suffered house arrest. That, for me, is real. She acted. She didn't spend three years telling stories to a psychopath.

LAILA: Why did you stop here? Go on finish the story and tell our audience how Doria Shafik failed. How the members of parliament went back on their promise to meet with the delegation and instead, Doria was summoned to appear in court. Didn't the king tell Doria's husband that as long as he is king there would be no political rights for women?

NOURA: That doesn't matter. What matters is the active attempt at making a difference.

LAILA: I don't see the difference between my story of Scheherazade and that of Doria, except that my lady succeeded where yours failed.

NOURA: What? You'd rather have her wait 1001 nights, sleep and have children with a killer?

LAILA: All right, some of the ideas seem antiquated, but there is still much one can learn from them. If only Doria acted like the young woman in the story of "The Young Woman and Her Five Lovers".

NOURA: Oh no!!!!

LAILA: There was once this beautiful young girl whose husband journeyed to a distant land and was gone for a long time. She gave up on him and fell in love with a handsome young man. One day, the young man was imprisoned after being caught in a violent brawl. Deeply grieved, she set out to free her lover, devising a cunning plan. She wore her finest robes, groomed herself and hurried to the governor,

pleading for the release of the prisoner whom she claimed to be her brother and sole supporter. The governor was smitten by the woman's beauty and suggested she wait for him in his harem whilst he prepared the release order. She persuaded him that it would be more private if he were to bring the signed order in person and they met at her house instead. That gained the governor's approval, and they agreed on the time. She then headed to the *Qadi's* office in the hope that he would give her the order, but he only wanted the same thing as the governor. So she invited him to her house as well. The same thing happened with the *Vizier*, and finally the King. She then headed to a carpenter and instructed him to build her a cupboard with four separate lockable compartments. The carpenter offered to charge her less if she accepted spending some time with him. She smiled, thanked him for his consideration, and invited him to her house that night. She asked him to add a fifth compartment to the cupboard. The first to arrive was the governor. She sat him down, got him some wine, and just as they got to the seductive embrace, she asked for the signed order. As soon as she had the order in her hand, the door bell rang heralding the arrival of the next lover. Pretending it was her husband, she rushed the governor to hide in one of the compartments and locked it. And so she managed to lock up the five lovers, and with four signed orders, she dashed to the prison and secured her lover's release.

NOURA: (Hands over ears) Stop, stop, stop right now, you are not finishing that story. That's precisely the view of women we should be fighting. All that seducing and charm to get your way, what a load of rubbish.

LAILA: But if Doria had been more flexible and had concocted a little plot to get her request formalized, she would have left that parliament with a signed document, not a verbal promise.

NOURA: Excuse me, in your tale, the woman is your typical cheap low-lying little ... Doria is fighting for equal rights, for having our existence acknowledged, and you are comparing her struggle to that of getting a lover released. What good is your story to our sorry reality?

LAILA: She made us laugh. It's entertaining.

NOURA: Laugh? Your story sets us women back many years; you even threw them back in the harems. Huda Sha'rawi lived those years in a harem, and she fought bloody hard to abolish them. Just forget your thousand and one nights' world of magic carpets and imagine this scene. At Cairo station, one spring day in 1923, a crowd of women with veils and long black cloaks descended from their horse-drawn carriages to welcome home two friends returning from an international women's meeting in Rome. Huda Sha'rawi and Saiza Nabarawi stepped out on the running board of the train. Suddenly, Huda, followed by Saiza, drew back the veil from their face. The waiting women broke into a loud applause. Some removed their veils as well. This daring act signalled the end of the harem system in Egypt. At that moment, Huda stood at two junctures of her life, the one she was leaving behind back in the harem and the one she would lead at the head of the women's movement. She freed herself from the narrowness of family circles and went on to create new institutions. She had courage and commitment; that's the kind of woman I want to hold up as an example, not your wily scheming women from a dusty old book of stories.

LAILA: But you can't sense the suffering. Had Huda's story been told by Scheherazade, she would have had a story abounding with misery like that tale of "The Woman Whose Hands Were Cut Off for Giving Alms to the Poor".

NOURA: C'mon this is getting silly, please!!!! ...

LAILA: (Insulted) A certain king once made a proclamation to the people of his realm saying, "If any of you give alms, I will have his hands cut off". All the people abstained from alms-giving. Now it happened that, one day, a hungry beggar came to a certain woman ...".

NOURA: (Laughing still)

LAILA: What's tickling you?

NOURA: That ridiculous title. Oh please, go on. I can hardly wait to hear the story.

LAILA: Enough, I can't concentrate on the story.

One day, a beggar came to a certain woman and asked for charity. She reminded him of the king's decree but he somehow managed to touch her heart, so she gave him two scones. The king heard of this and cut off her hands. And as fate would have it, the king one day told his mother to marry him off to a fair woman. His mother mentioned one of their female slaves who is unsurpassed in beauty, but who has a grievous blemish; both her hands are cut off. The king asked to see the woman and was ravished by her beauty. He married her instantly, and with time, she bore him a son. Things were going fine until his other wives became envious and plotted to ruin the woman's relationship with the king. They accused her of being unchaste and of delivering an illegitimate son. The king ordered his wife's banishment to the desert along with her son. She came to a river and knelt down to drink, but, as she bent her head, the child she was holding fell into the water. She sat weeping bitter tears for her child. Behold, two men came out of the water and asked about the reason for her deep sorrow. They prayed to God and the child came forth, out of the water, to her bosom, safe and sound. Then the two men once more prayed, and this time, her hands were restored to her. Then they asked her if she knew who they were, and she replied that only God knows what she does not know. The two men said they were the two scones which she gave to the beggar and which were the cause of the cutting off of her hands.

NOURA: Enough, enough that's it. I'm speechless, mortified at the total idiocy of this story. I'll tell you a real story about a real woman who suffered hardship but who did something about it, not waited for two scones to bring her justice.

The story of Rania has none of this hocus pocus crap of Sheherazade. Rania had a beautiful face, and every morning, her beautiful face appeared on television screens across homes in Saudi Arabia. She started her career in her late teens. By her early 20s, she had become one of the best known TV figures in Saudi Arabia. She had had a short-lived marriage and a daughter when in 1998, Rania met the singer, Yunus, and soon, defying custom, they had a love marriage. Rania and Yunus had two children, boys. Shortly after their marriage, her husband's popularity dwindled. Rania gained

more fame. Jealous, Yunus started to become more violent. Rania did not report this to the authorities for many reasons. Mainly, she feared that their relation would only get worse if reports of Yunus' violence were taken outside the home. One night, Yunus came home to find his wife on the telephone. After accusing her of cheating on him, he proceeded to beat her up. Rania's house helper was there; she was afraid to intervene, but she said that Yunus knocked his wife down to her knees and began to choke her, while punching her face. He kept saying, "I am going to kill you." He kept banging Rania's head on the floor until she became unconscious; then he stopped, showered, and changed. He wrapped Rania in a sheet and put her in the back of his car. At some point during the drive, Rania suddenly regained consciousness. Yunus panicked and rushed her to hospital at about 2:30 a.m. He told the hospital staff that Rania had been in a car crash. He then went to the site of the "car crash" to "save" the other victims. In reality, he went into hiding. Rania suffered thirteen facial fractures and had to undergo extensive surgery. Her relatives, friends and colleagues encouraged her to go public. Her battered swollen face was seen in every local paper and magazine. Newspapers called her story a "ground-breaker". Her story was a wake-up call to the abuse that was going on all around. Finally, the cat was out of the bag. For the first time in Saudi Arabia, it was publicly acknowledged that domestic violence does exist just like anywhere else in the world. That, for me is true hardship and pain.

LAILA: (Silent)

NOURA: Why silent? Is this reality too harsh for Scheherazade's world of fantasy?

LAILA: No, not at all. Rania's story is very sad and Scheherazade tells a far more heartbreaking story. At least in Scheherazade's story of "The Tale of the Three Apples" justice is served without delay.

NOURA: Great!

LAILA: One day, the caliph Harun al-Rashid desired to go down into the city and find out how his people were faring. He came upon a very old fisherman who pulled out a chest in which was found the body of a fair young lady slain and cut into nineteen pieces. The Caliph turning to Ja'afar,

his *Vizier*, ordered an immediate search to find the murderer; otherwise, the *Vizier* himself would be hanged. To Ja'afar's good fortune, a young man came forward and confessed to the murder.

When the young man married his wife, she was a maid and God blessed him with three male children. She fell ill with a grievous sickness. One day, she had a craving for apples, so he went instantly into the city in search of apples, but he could find none. At last, by chance, he saw an old gardener who informed him that apples can only be found in the garden of the Commander of the Faithful. His love for his wife and his affection moved him to undertake the journey. So he travelled fifteen days and nights, and brought her three apples. But when he went in to his wife and set them before her, she took no pleasure in them and let them lie by her side. So, slightly disappointed, he left the house and went to his shop. About midday, a slave passed by his shop holding in his hand one of the three apples. The husband called to the slave and asked where he had gotten that specific fruit. The slave laughed and answered, "I got it from my mistress; I had been absent for a while, and on my return, I found her lying ill with three apples by her side. She told me how her idiot of a husband made a fifteen-day journey to get them for her. So I ate and drank with her and took this apple from her". When the husband heard those words, the world grew black before his face, and he rose instantly, locked up the shop and went home. He looked for the apples, and finding only two of the three, asked his wife where the third apple was. She raised her head languidly and said that she did not know. This convinced him that the slave had spoken the truth, so he took a knife, and without uttering a word, cut her throat. Then he hewed off her head and her limbs in pieces, placed them in a chest and threw it into the river.

(Throughout the story, Noura comes closer and is quite taken by the story)

When he went back home, he found his eldest son crying. Upon inquiring about the reason for his

tears, the boy said that he had taken one of the three apples which were by his mother's bedside and went down into the lane to play with his brothers when behold, a cruel slave snatched it from his hand. The slave had heard the story of how the boy's father struggled to get these apples for his sick wife. When the husband heard what his child had said, he fell to his knees weeping, knowing that the slave had foully slandered his wife.

The caliph marvelled at his words and said, "By God, this young man is excusable; I will hang none but the accursed slave".

NOURA: And Scheherazade perceived the dawn of day and ceased saying her permitted say.

LAILA: But there's more to the story.

NOURA: And I'm sure those good people would love to hear it, but I've had it. You and Scheherazade tell a good story. I listened and I was riveted, but I can't help it. I hate that I was taken in; it makes me fume. The guy chops his wife into little bits and throws her in the river without a shred of evidence and the great caliph forgives him because somehow men are naturally jealous and violent so all is forgiven! I've had enough (starts to leave)

LAILA: Where are you going?

NOURA: I'm going out into the real world. I have perceived the dawn of day and have ceased to say my permitted say.

LAILA: (Teasingly to the audience) Do you want to hear another story? Perhaps tomorrow.

Eve, what can we say, if we were Adam, we would have taken the shorter road of compliance, but having your physical and mental make-up, we cannot but be self-critical, endure hardship, aim at excelling, be positive, and embrace others. That does not mean I don't still have that bone to pick with you.

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ENDNOTE

1. *Jinni* is in Islamic mythology, a spirit that can take on various human and animal forms and makes mischievous use of its supernatural powers.