

British artist refuses government money in protest against Iraq war

Paul Bond
5 April 2003

Nabil Shaban, the British actor, writer and filmmaker, has returned a government grant in protest over the war in Iraq. The grant of £50,000, the first installment of which (£24,800) had just been given to Shaban's film company Sirius Pictures by the Department of Work and Pensions, would have enabled him to achieve a 15-year ambition to produce his theatrical work *The First to Go*, a play about the murder of disabled people during the Nazi Holocaust.

Jordanian-born Shaban, who is wheelchair-bound with brittle bone disease, is one of British theatre's most interesting performers. He has appeared in many television and film productions, including Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein*, although he has probably achieved most public recognition for *City of Joy* with Patrick Swayze and his appearances as Sil in BBC TV's *Dr. Who*. The writer, director and graphic artist was awarded an honorary doctorate for his work in the performing arts. It is in the theatre, particularly, that this energetic and unforgiving campaigner for disability rights has made his most impressive contributions.

He was the co-founder in 1980 of Britain's first full-time professional disabled theatre company, Graeae. With Graeae he set about challenging the patronising attitude of the theatre establishment to disabled actors. Having stood his ground and shown the quality he could assemble around his own abilities, he has refused to be assimilated into that establishment.

When he finally appeared at the National Theatre (in an adaptation of Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*), for example, he met Alan Rickman backstage. Rickman, who is on the board of Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), asked him what could be done to assist disabled actors. Shaban, who had suffered this experience himself, suggested that not refusing them places at drama schools might be a start.

One of Shaban's biggest bodied actors "cripping up" (his phrase) for roles. When, 15 years ago, he began to research the murder of the disabled by the Nazis, he determined to see disabled actors in the leading roles.

Ewan Marshall, then artistic director of Graeae, commissioned Shaban to write a first draft of the play, which he submitted in 1996. The play was entitled *The First to Go*, as disabled people were among the first victims of the gas chambers. When Marshall moved on, the incoming artistic director shelved the project.

Shaban then tried to get a film production of the project underway. The British Film Institute commissioned a screenplay, but the production department was axed before it could get any further. When BFI Production was replaced by the government-funded Film Council, the project was rejected. Shaban was similarly unable to get BBC Films to take the project on board.

Late last year Shaban saw the opportunity of funding a theatre production of his original play script. He applied to the government-run European Year of Disabled People Projects Fund for backing, and was awarded the money that would have allowed the project to go ahead. "And then," in his own words, "jingoistic Blair has to go and ruin it all by ignoring public and world opinion, instead preferring to hang onto Bush's coat tails as the great White House buffoon launches into yet another war to steal oil for the United States."

He described the award, under these conditions, as "blood money," and refused to participate in what he calls a PR exercise in making the government look good, particularly when the UK was involved in a brutal slaughter in Iraq. "The purpose of giving out this money was to celebrate the European Year of Disabled People ... I feel what is actually happening is that we

have an Anglo-American year for disabling people.”

He has written: “When Bush and Blair started the war ... I knew I had to make a gesture to show the strength of my opposition to this illegal, unjust and morally reprehensible pre-emptive attack on a sovereign state. For this gesture to be powerful, I knew I would have to make a sacrifice”. He went to Downing Street, and returned the cheque.

Because he did not have an appointment, the prime minister refused to see him. Shaban made an appointment and returned in order to hand back the contract and declare it null and void.

The project cannot continue without funding. The setback is a painful one, but Shaban explains: “It does feel like a big sacrifice throwing my play away after all these years ... but that’s exactly the point ... It ought to make the public realise that we who oppose Bush and Blair are not playing games and we mean what we say.”

Elsewhere he has written: “I had to show that I meant business, that I was jettisoning a 15-year ambition and dream in an attempt to save Iraqi men, women and children ... All I can do now is hope my little ripple will add to a tidal wave that will sweep Bush and Blair and all the other war-mongers from office.”



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