

# Globe Review

PUTTING THE WORLD ON STAGE ■ THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

Fascinated by the human fallout of war, Toronto theatre director Christopher Morris travelled to Afghanistan to assemble a team of local actors. Parwin Mushtahel eagerly jumped on board. Then came a fateful and deadly knock at her family's front door. **James Bradshaw** reports



## United by the theatre of war

On Canadian Forces Base Petawawa, a nighttime knock at the door can bring tidings of death. When a soldier is killed, officers often deliver the news to family members between the hours of 11 p.m. and 6 a.m. And so, night after night, the wife of a Canadian fighting in Afghanistan goes to bed dressed as though it were daytime, the front room of her home meticulously tidied, ready to receive an always half-expected visitor.

On the outskirts of Kabul, another knock in the dark hours also brings death's messenger. A man answers a rap at the door and is ushered outside. Before long, he lies sprawled in the street, shot dead by his uninvited guest. His wife, an Afghan actor, knows the bullets were a message to her — that she would have been gunned down had her husband's assailant been greeted instead by her face, familiar from television, staring back at him through the door frame.

These are but two of countless stories that document the tremendous strain borne by families on both sides of the Afghan war. Woven together

with dozens of others, they form the groundwork of *Petawawa*, a collaborative theatre project being developed — in four cities, on two continents — by Christopher Morris, artistic director of Toronto theatre company Human Cargo.

Morris began crafting the project early last year, aiming to examine “the long-term reverberations of war,” not only through the lens of Canadian soldiers and their loved ones, but also of the parents, siblings and children of Pakistani soldiers fighting in border regions, and of Afghans embroiled in both sides of the conflict.

When he set out to gather those stories, he expected to hear tragic accounts of domestic hardship and gruesome tales of war. What he did not foresee was how entwined his life would become with one of those stories in particular. He certainly never imagined he would answer his Toronto phone months later to the sounds of an Afghan woman desperately trying to tell him, in a language he doesn't understand, that her husband had been murdered.

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Mushtahel (right), who escaped to Pakistan earlier this month; actor Kawa Ada (above, left) with Morris in Herat last fall: sharing an unshakeable faith in the role of theatre to chronicle the tragedies that have reverberated from the war in Afghanistan. CHARLA JONES/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



**This is my profession and I love my profession. So whatever it costs, even if it costs my life, I will continue and go ahead with it.**

Widowed Afghan actress Parwin Mushtahel

INTERVIEW ■ DREW BARRYMORE

## A Hollywood princess brings new life to squalid Grey Gardens



**There was a point towards the end of filming when we were doing one of the documentary scenes, and I realized that I wasn't, like, on the verge of vomiting before we did it, and I thought, 'Oh, this is good ...'**

Barrymore at the New York premiere of *Grey Gardens* this week. ERIC THAYER/REUTERS

BY SIMON HOUPPT NEW YORK

Drew Barrymore's heavy drinking days are largely behind her, but there was good reason that, when she was shooting the television *Grey Gardens* in Toronto, she spent her weekends on the sozzled side of life.

"I would go to a bar every Saturday night and just pound drinks as a release," she recalled the other day, "and then recover Sunday and then go back to work on Monday."

Work was the reason she needed the release in the first place. Because while Barrymore, a native of Los Angeles and a descendent of Hollywood royalty, has lately gained a comfortable perch as a bankable leading lady of middle-

brow romantic comedies, she belongs more to the species of celebrity known as Star than the one known as Actor. And yet for *Grey Gardens*, the period film that premieres tonight on HBO Canada, Barrymore pulled a Daniel Day-Lewis: not just staying in character on-set through the course of the 7½-week shoot, but also cutting herself off from the usual barrage of communications she typically endures every day ("no cellphones, no television, no music, no driving, no newspapers, no magazines, anything") in order to get in touch with her character's isolation.

Barrymore's challenge was to play not just a dramatic character but one about whom many people feel proprietary. » SEE 'GARDENS' PAGE 6

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Theatre director Morris: That's a generation growing up experiencing this, and that will influence the next generation's outlook. This is important stuff.  
CHARLIE JONES/GLOBE AND MAIL

## Dramatic passions, deadly repercussions

**PETAWAWA'S ROOTS**  
Morris, 34, favours the theatre that latches onto the sometimes grand, often galling political and social issues of the day — and that “says something about them.” He also loves to explore opportunities for cultural cross-pollination. He has spent up to a year at a time studying theatre in locales as far-flung as Dublin and Tbilisi — places where he can “be broken by [the experience] and learn something new.” In 2007, those forays spurred him to launch a company under the name Human Cargo. Soon afterward, he heard a CBC Radio interview with a soldier's wife in Petawawa, Ont., home to a Canadian Forces base that frequently deploys soldiers to Afghanistan. She spoke of the fear she felt at every report of a rise in violence, and of the loneliness that consumed her. Her story stuck with him, and Morris began turning over a theory in his mind: that creating a clearly defined enemy is crucial to protecting a soldier's — and a country's — mental health. One logical question that followed: “What happens to us if we consider [the enemy's] families?”

As that question began crystallizing in his mind, Morris recruited some of his favourite colleagues to help him figure out how to use theatre to answer it: long-time friend and playwright Jonathan Garfinkel, 36; actor Michelle Latimer, 34, whom he describes as “daring, bold and very sweet”; and the Shaw Festival's Kawa Ada, 28, whose family had fled Afghanistan when he was young. The troupe set about finding war-affected families who were willing to tell their stories, and making plans for a trip to Pakistan and Afghanistan. And so, that CBC interview still on his mind, Morris set out for Petawawa.

**GATHERING STORIES**

He landed in the Ottawa Valley town last July for a two-week stay, accompanied by his girlfriend, set and costume designer Gillian Gallow. At the base's Tim Hortons, Morris sat and listened to all kinds of stories, of the tensions that brewed between on-edge couples as a deployment nears; of infidelity and guilt; of stoic but undeniably shaken children; of soldiers witnessing the gruesome deaths of friends and colleagues; of the horrors of posttraumatic stress disorder; and of those dreaded “knocks in the night.” That's a generation growing up experiencing this, and that will influence the next generation's outlook,” says Morris. “This is important stuff.”

One soldier had constant nightmares after returning from an overseas stint — and one night tried to strangle his wife in his sleep. One woman talked about the desensitization training her husband had undergone. (He was administered a test, she told Morris, whose questions included this



Actress Mushthel (left) with fellow actors.



Members of Lahore's Ajoka Theatre.

one: “What do you feel when you shoot a woman?” The correct answer, she claimed: “The recoil of the gun.” In September, Morris and Gallow set off for Pakistan, landing in Islamabad with hopes of finding collaborators in the local theatre community. Morris designed the trip to be flexible, allowing him to follow the leads and introductions his contacts would provide along the way. One such tip led him to the Ajoka Theatre in Lahore, where he befriended Samiya Muntaz, one of the company's foremost actor-directors. He enlisted her both to eventually act in Petawawa, and to be a fixer of sorts who could gather stories from Pakistanis, particularly women.

Then things began to get decidedly dicier. On Oct. 2, Morris travelled alone to Kabul, armed with advice and contacts he had garnered mostly from Western journalists. He grew a beard, donned a billowing shalwar kameez and perhaps naively — walked Kabul without a guide.

It quickly became clear to him the enormity of the risk he was taking. In the span of a week, CBC journalist Melissa Fung was kidnapped, a Ger-

man-South African aid worker was gunned down in the street, and a second foreigner was also murdered. Morris's hosts secured him a guest-house, afraid of housing him themselves. Taking a brief detour to meet Siddiq Barmak, director of the 2003 film *Osama*, Morris opted to go by plane rather than car — after hearing tales of drivers slaughtered along Taliban-controlled roads for offences as minor as having English names programmed into their cell-phones.

In Afghanistan, he remembers thinking, “Death is irrelevant. It's all irrelevant. If it might help your cause, just kill. It doesn't matter. It's strange.”

**MEETING MUSHTAHEL**

Then Morris encountered someone who would give him a strikingly different perspective. Meeting with some of the principal players of a 2006 CBC documentary chronicling a Kabul production of *Love's Labours Lost* directed by Canadian Corinne Laver, Morris made the acquaintance of Parwin Mushtahel. The 41-year-old had made a life out of acting in a society

that makes it anything but easy for a woman to pursue such a career. Over the years, she repeatedly received death threats — some of which, she said, had come from her husband's family. Still, there had been enough encouragement and opportunities along the way to make acting a viable profession for Mushtahel. “When I was 6, my family encouraged me for this profession, and then I started to love this profession,” she recently told *The Globe and Mail*, through a translator, over the telephone from Kabul. By 1996, Mushtahel had joined a local theatre company, where she worked for five years before moving to Radio Television Afghanistan, later earning a role on an Afghan sitcom.

Though not wildly famous, she is a recognizable figure in Afghan cultural life. And after more than two decades of amateur and professional stagecraft, her motivation to act is still joyously simple. “When I'm in a play, on a stage, when I play my part, when I see the audience, their smiles, their laughing, when I see their draining mugs, it encourages me and I enjoy it. When they

**I feel like I've been made to do this project.**

Director Christopher Morris

are clapping, it encourages me, and some of them even cry. ... When I leave the stage at the end of the play, people come up to me and they give me a hug and they kiss my face, and they applaud,” Mushtahel said. “It makes me proud.”

From the first, Morris found Mushtahel a bold, funny, wry and nurturing figure. “I thought: That's the perfect mix for this, because the trap for this kind of project is for it to be very sentimental. I'm not up for that. It needs at least one actor who will keep it from that,” says Morris.

The two hit it off, despite not speaking each other's languages, and Morris recruited Mushtahel as an actor and story gatherer, pleased that she would have the same sort of access to Afghan women as Muntaz did in Pakistan.

Months later, with Morris back in Toronto and his various collaborators taking a short hiatus before their work on *Petawawa* began in earnest, the ongoing death threats against Mushtahel materialized into that fateful knock at the door of her home.

Her husband was lured out of their house and shot dead in the street by a mysterious attacker. Mushtahel remembers hearing the gunshots, but has no idea at whom they were directed. The shooter fled the scene, where Mushtahel found her husband's body riddled with bullets.

She was convinced the gunman had come for her, and she quickly went into hiding with their children — a daughter, 6, and son, 7 — but even that proved difficult: Family members were justifiably worried that her presence would endanger them. And although she soon found reliable safe havens, after two decades of steady acting, she was unable to work, could not send her children to school, and was forced to conceal her identity by shrouding herself in the burka she had long despised as a symbol of Afghanistan's ills.

It's taken a psychological toll on her and her children. “[My children] talk in their sleep and they are scared in their sleep,” Mushtahel told *The Globe*. “I have a problem myself: I have lost my memory. I forget things. I can't memorize things.”

Recounting the dramatic telephone call Mushtahel made to him on the night of her husband's murder, and accounts relayed by her friends in the days that followed, Morris paints a stark picture of the violence that haunts her. “They shot him in the head,” says Morris. “Right there. Boom. Boom. Boom.”

Early this month, escorted by a friend, Mushtahel and her children fled to Pakistan, where a friend has rented them an apartment and furnished it with such necessities as cutlery, dishes and a refrigerator. She had a meeting scheduled last week with officers at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to try to find asylum outside the country, and although Canada is her preferred destination, she will go “anywhere safe.” Should she escape, she says, she doesn't ever expect to return to Afghanistan, which she sees as rapidly descending into lawlessness, even in such big cities as Kabul.

Asked why she wants to continue to act in the face of such danger, her voice swells with intensity. “This is my profession and I love my profession. So whatever it costs, even if it costs my life, I will continue and go ahead with it.”

**FORGING AHEAD**

Mushtahel's tragedy has thrown something of a wrench into the gears of Morris's project, but he is pressing on, throwing “the rules of creating material out the window.” He is still planning a series of four workshops to gather more stories and create a script — with his Canadian actors in Petawawa this July; with Muntaz in Lahore in December; at the Foundation for Culture and Civil Society in Kabul in January; and, finally, in Toronto in September, 2010, with all the collaborators together. And he is determined to stage *Petawawa* before Canada's scheduled troop withdrawal in 2011, and to perform it — in a mixture of English, Dari and Urdu — in all four cities, as well as in Islamabad.

Still, the road ahead appears increasingly daunting. “I'm fucking scared at the idea of going back to Afghanistan,” he says, for starters. “It's not an appealing thought.”

Mushtahel, too, remains committed to *Petawawa*, through which she says she hopes to remind the world of the bravery of those Afghan women who would shed archaic traditions and take on their own careers. She will now be forced to gather stories for the script by phone, Morris says, and if necessary will appear by video in some of the internationally staged performances.

Another challenge facing *Petawawa* involves money. So far, Morris has wracked up bills of more than \$15,000. But he remains undaunted. “I feel like I've been made to do this project,” he says. “Right now.”

And so he carries on, inspired in large part by Mushtahel's unshakable faith in the role that theatre can play in telling the stories of those whose lives have been torn apart by war — including that of a talented actress, widow and mother of two, for whom life continues to unfold in un-expected ways.