

## The NRLA Ball

*(Both Touching the Sky and Eating Dust: Me & My Bastard Art)*

**Qasim Riza Shaheen**

My mother has always advised me to pull myself together and not give pieces of myself away to others; that if I continued this way eventually I would be left with nothing to call myself. I went against all her concerns and opted for live art practice. Eight years ago the National Review of Live Art invited me to show a little more of me after having seen my work at the greenroom through hAb in Manchester; who in the main have been my nurturing venue and producer. I showed a piece called **A Man's Review** (2000) which simply involved me reading an article written about me ('a South Asian British male artist') by an 'authentic' South East Asian & South Asian mixed heritage woman by the name of my second ex-wife (one has dabbled in the performance of matrimony too!).

In NRLA 2008 (with a cardamom and an ankle bell) I offered invitations to a piece entitled **Queer Courtesan** (the second of five one-on-one peep shows) where I danced a one minute dance to a choice of 7" vinyl records that once belonged to my father. In between those two pieces I showed other parts of myself too, for instance my hairy legs which I shaved next to a projection of a film in which I cut off my 'year old' beard to the call to prayer (**Talib** 2003) and then 4 years later to the track YMCA being played on my mobile phone – all in the name of the emasculation of Muslim men post-terror/(territorial)ism. **Being Muslim/Routes** (2007) was a result of a three week residency in Glasgow during the month of Ramadhan where I filmed cars driving into Glasgow's Mosque Avenue as a sister piece to the work shown at the Liverpool Biennial mapping out the story of William Abdullah Quilliam and the devotional marks left in unsuspecting cities.

My Year On piece that I was commissioned to present in 2001 was entitled **Conversing with Angels** which was born out of my fear of being questioned by an angel during the first 7 days of death. It was also about displaying every item of white prayer clothing that I owned whilst calling the men I loved. In retrospect, what was a tale of the passing on of religion from father to son couldn't escape being tainted by my post 9/11 blues. If nothing it was my testimony of the awakening of a new consciousness amongst British Muslims. I think I danced away the unholy war with revelations of my childhood stories coupled with Billie Holiday and Sarah Vaughn's vocals (again to the tune of my father's records). My performances at NRLA served as a milestone of sort in between which other significant works were produced for both black box and site specific contexts.

From 2001-2008 NRLA presented Qasim Riza Shaheen 4 times; as awfully queer, fundamentally Muslim, extremely British and most recently as a voluptuous courtesan – four costumes precisely tailored for four interchangeable, performed and lived experiences. My self-definitions evolved over 8 years of making work for a grand festival that became my step mother and 3 ugly sisters rolled into one, where I would proudly attend the ball, leave my glass slipper behind and hope for prince charming to email me.