

# **Betrothed**

By Rachel Dickstein

Excerpt

Adapted from  
"The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" by Jhumpa Lahiri

with an original score by Vijay Iyer

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*The action of Betrothed is split into three sections:*

*Part 1: Bibi*

*Part 2: Nadya*

*Part 3: Leah*

*The action runs approximately 80 minutes with no intermission ( pauses between pieces should be kept as minimal as possible)*

*Production requires diverse casting. The actors playing Bibi, Haldar and Mrs. Haldar should ideally be of South Asian descent. Actors in all roles should double so that they reappear in each part as much as possible. (ie Bibi doubles as the Messenger in the Leah section, Haldar doubles as the Rabbi. All performers in Nadya are members of the chorus in Bibi.) The size of the ensemble is flexible. It was originally performed by nine actors, 5W and 4M. This could be expanded or made smaller but each heroine must be played by a different actor, ideally from different racial/ethnic backgrounds.*

*Choreographed sequences occur throughout the action and are an integral part of the adaptation of the source texts. While some of this action is described in the text, video documentation should accompany reading of this script to fully see how movement and text support the action of the story-telling.*

*Betrothed is scored throughout by live music. Moments in the script that indicate music are especially significant musical shifts, not the only moments in which music underscores action or text. Musicians are visible, but not part of the live action on stage.*

*Chorus text in Part 1 is divided up over six voices with one chorus member acting as a chorus leader. Some text is overlapped over several voices and a line break indicates when a new voice takes over.*

*The original score was commissioned by Ripe Time from Vijay Iyer and is intended to be performed live by a cellist and a flutist.*

***The Treatment of Bibi Haldar*** by Jhumpa Lahiri, appears in the collection *The Interpreter of Maladies*, published in 1999 and is used with special permission by Ms. Lahiri, personally. Rights formally negotiated under the author's representation in 2006. Renewal of rights available with Eric Simonoff at William Morris Entertainment.

***The Dybbuk***, by S. Ansky, as translated by Joachim Negroscchel used with permission by Charles Borschardt, Inc. Renewable.

## ***PART 1: Bibi***

*As the audience enters the theatre, we hear a cello playing and three women moving in pools of light across a floor painted with henna pattern. Their actions are quiet, simple, sensual, and private. The environment should feel like an ancient place of worship or a catacomb, full of history and time. Two other women cross the stage and others join her, looking back at Bibi, who remains. As they cross out, long sari cloths, hanging like abstracted clotheslines, slide onstage. Bibi looks at the audience.*

### **BIBI**

*(Showing the audience the saris hung throughout the space) The first part of the ceremony I will wear this one, then this one, then this. (she closes her eyes imagining) butter poured in the fire, vermilion painted fish, trays of shells and silver coins . . . when it happens to me (her eyes open and she looks at the audience), you will all be present.*

*She dreams. We hear whispers filling the space, as if echoing through her memory. The chorus, made of people from her town, enters from behind watching her. Music and voices build. Slowly, as she listens to the text in the air, she starts to suffer an attack.*

### **CHORUS**

Beautiful, in a way  
I've never seen such a curious  
I hear she  
what would you do if  
it's a kind of sickness  
Just walk away  
Such a curious  
She really ought to  
Don't you think  
the devil they say  
holy water from all seven holy rivers!  
But they've tried everything  
If only they would  
eucalyptus balm right on the temple . . .  
herbal infusions for her face!  
Her face  
Auspicious stones for her fingers!  
Her fingers  
Ward against the evil eye!  
Her whole body  
Quaking  
Who would touch her  
It's horrible  
Horrible  
Touch her  
Did you see

horrible  
I wouldn't know what to do if

*The chorus members/ townspeople lift her up as she undergoes the throes of the attack. Suddenly, she pulls back from the others, suddenly awake and stable. She gestures to them as if not to bother, to go about their business. They do.*

*Music shifts. The stage becomes a town square: Women manipulate the hanging saris like laundry that is being washed and hung out to dry. The stage is filled with a bustling energy.*

#### CHORUS

Bibi Haldar suffered from an ailment that baffled family, friends, priests, palmists, spinsters, gem therapists, prophets, and fools. When we heard her screams in the night, we named her in our prayers.

We brought her by train to kiss the tombs of saints and martyrs.

We adorned her fingers with auspicious stones.

The doctors all disagreed on her treatment.

#### THE DOCTORS

*(made of men in chorus)*

She should sleep beyond dawn,

remain in bed till noon

perform headstands

chant Vedic verses at specified intervals throughout the day

Meditate

drink green coconut water

swallow raw duck's eggs beaten in milk

#### CHORUS

Bibi's life was an encounter with one fruitless antidote after another.

#### HALDAR

*Appears upstage suddenly*

She can't be trusted to cross the street or leave the house. She could fall ill at any moment. She will work for me where she is safe from harm and from others' sight.

CHORUS

Her cousin Haldar and his wife had Bibi recording inventory in their shop. (*Mrs. Haldar enters and meets her husband.*) From a tiny storage room on their roof, she bemoaned her fate and challenged her stars.

*The Haldar's cross upstage to their shop. Bibi weaves through the washing women, watching them and their tasks with envy.*

BIBI

I ask you, is it fair for a girl to sit out her years, pass neglected through her prime, listing labels and prices without a future? Is it wrong to envy you, all brides and mothers, busy with lives and cares? Wrong to want to shade my eyes, scent my hair? To raise a child and teach him sweet from sour, good from bad?

CHORUS

Bibi wanted a man. She wanted to be spoken for, protected, placed on her path in life.

BIBI

I want to serve suppers and scold servants, I want to have my eyebrows threaded every three weeks at the Chinese beauty parlor.

CHORUS

She hungered after the details of our own weddings

BIBI

Butter poured in fires, vermilion-painted fish, trays of shells and silver coins. When it happens to me you will all be present.

CHORUS

Anticipation began to plague her with such ferocity that the thought of a husband threatened at times to send her into another attack.

BIBI

*(alone in the storage room)*

I will never dip my feet in milk. My face will never be painted with sandalwood paste. Who will rub me with turmeric? My name will never be printed with scarlet ink on a card.

CHORUS

we wrapped her in shawls

washed her face from the cistern tap

brought her glasses of yogurt and rosewater

but malaise dripped like a fever from her pores.

BIBI

Where do I go, who would I dress for? Who takes me to the cinema, the zoo-garden, buys me lime soda and cashews? Admit it, are these concerns of mine? I will never be cured, never married.

CHORUS

But then a new treatment was prescribed for Bibi, the most outrageous of them all.

*The doctors appear. We see a mad sequence as doctors pull and prod Bibi's body attempting to heal her until it is finally announced:*

DOCTOR

A marriage will cure her.

CHORUS

News spread

palmists examined Bibi's hand

and confirmed clear evidence of an imminent union etched into her skin.

For days afterward, we whispered.

They say it's the only hope.

A case of overexcitement, they say

ALL

relations will calm her blood

BIBI

Polish the toenails, soften the elbows.  
a new *salwar-kameez* in an umbrella cut  
Benarasi silk, in magenta, turquoise, marigold . . .

*She closes her eyes and imagines her wedding. Long panels of silk rise, fall and envelop her as if in a dream. She revels in the spectacle, dancing in the midst of a panoply of color and sound.*

*She wakes. Haldar and his wife enter talking to the townspeople.*

HALDAR

We have little time for indecent suggestions. What won't be cured must be endured. Bibi has caused enough worry, added enough to expenses, sullied enough the family name.

MRS. HALDAR

Besides who would marry her? The girl knows nothing about anything, speaks backwards, is practically thirty, can't light a stove, can't boil rice, can't tell the difference between fennel and a cumin seed. Imagine her attempting to feed a man!

CHORUS

They had a point.

Bibi had never been taught to be a woman.

HALDAR

She possesses insufficient quantities of respect and self-control.

MRS. HALDAR

She plays up her malady for the attention.

HALDAR

The best thing is to keep her occupied, away from the trouble she invariably creates.

CHORUS

Why not marry her off, then? It will get her off your hands, at least.

HALDAR

And waste our profits on a wedding? Feeding guests, ordering bracelets, buying a bed, assembling a dowry?

*They exit.*

CHORUS

But Bibi's gripes persisted. She insisted on being taken to the photographer's studio so that her portrait, like those of other brides-in-waiting, could be circulated in the homes of eligible men.

BIBI

Apart from my x-rays, I have never been photographed. Potential in-laws need to know what I look like.

*Bibi poses with great effort for the camera. A photographer coaches her to try and look beautiful. A shutter clicks. The women of the town watch. She sighs.*

*Bibi retreats behind a cloth. She is alone. She takes off her housecoat revealing her body. She is beautiful. An intricate weave of hennaed pattern in light pours down her body as if liquid.*

*Haldar speaks to Mrs. Haldar in their shop upstage. Bibi's reverie ends, and she quickly covers herself.*

HALDAR

Anyone who wishes to see her could observe her for themselves, weeping and wailing and warding off customers. She is a bane for business, a liability, a loss. Who in this town needs a photo to know that?

MRS. HALDAR

She is hateful. I don't see why she can't live with your cousins.

HALDAR

I don't – I can't –

MRS. HALDAR

You must find someone for her to marry then.

*Mrs. Haldar continues to needle her husband underneath Bibi's words*

BIBI

On Sundays, he plucks hairs from her chin. They keep their money refrigerated under lock and key. In the bath she applied chickpea flour to her arms because she thinks it will make her paler. The third toe on her right foot is missing. The reason they take such long siestas is that she is impossible to please.

CHORUS

To get her to quiet down, Haldar placed a one-line advertisement in the town newspaper, in order to solicit a groom

HALDAR

*(MRS. HALDAR STANDS BY HIM WATCHING APPROVINGLY AS HE WRITES)*

GIRL, UNSTABLE, HEIGHT 152 CENTIMETRES, SEEKS HUSBAND.

CHORUS

The identity of the prospective bride was no secret to the parents of our young men

But no family was willing to shoulder so blatant a risk.

Who could blame them?

It was rumored by many that Bibi conversed with herself without dreams.



Nevertheless, to distract her, we began to coach her in wifely ways.

*The women assemble behind her coaching her in word and action.*

Frowning like a rice pot will get you nowhere.

Men require that you caress them with your expression. *(Repeat above two phrases twice)*

How long is your braid?

How well do you cook?

Say: how do you do?

How do you do?

BIBI

*(with great effort and far too loudly)* How do you do?

*The men, watching from afar, newspapers in hand, retreat. Bibi sighs. The women in the chorus recognize their efforts have failed.*

CHORUS

When two months had passed without a single reply to the advertisement, Haldar and his wife felt vindicated.

MRS. HALDAR

Now do you see that she is unfit to marry?

HALDAR

Now do you see no man of sane mind would touch her?

CHORUS

But she was still determined to lure a man.

BIBI

Apart from my condition, I am perfectly healthy. I have never had a cold or flu. I have never had jaundice. I have never suffered from colic or indigestion.

CHORUS

We consoled her; when she was convinced a man was giving her the eye, we humored her and agreed. But she was not our responsibility. And in our private moments we were thankful for it.

*Music. The others cross upstage in couples. Bibi is left alone. We see her retreat to the storage room, she sits.*

CHORUS

In November we learned that Haldar's wife was pregnant. That morning in the storage room, Bibi wept.

*We see Mrs. Haldar very pregnant. Bibi moves towards her as if to help, but Haldar shoos Bibi away like a dog, back to her storage room.*

BIBI

She says I'm contagious, like the pox. She says I'll spoil the baby. What will become of me? Is it not punishment enough that I bear this curse alone? Must I also be blamed for infecting another?

CHORUS

And then one afternoon, without word or warning, it happened again.

*Bibi suffers another attack. She arches back across a long piece of fabric that the others hold under her. She shakes. The groups lifts and rises with the rhythm of labored breath. She lowers herself to the ground and suddenly breaks away from the group, recovered. The other see she has roused.*

Bibi, what happened?

Tell us what happened.

BIBI

I felt hot, then hotter. Smoke passed before my eyes. The world went black. Didn't you see it?

*She travels back to the Haldars, escorted by the townspeople. Haldar stops them at his door.*

HALDAR

The medical risk is too great for an expectant mother to be in contact with an hysterical person.

CHORUS

And so Haldar sent her to the roof to record her inventory.

She ate milk and bread in the stairwell.

She slept in the storage room.

Another seizure, and another went unchecked.

*Music. Time passes. The weather grows colder. Mrs. Haldar gives birth. She looks at the baby and the baby seems ill. A doctor checks the child.*

MRS. HALDAR

*to the doctor*

Cure her. We can give you anything, just cure my baby girl!

CHORUS

The doctor prescribed a treatment but five days later the fever had not budged.

MRS. HALDAR

It's Bibi. She's done it. She's infected our child. We should never have let her back into this house.

CHORUS

So Bibi spent her nights in the storage room again. And, in truth, she stopped going out altogether.

BIBI

I don't mind. It's better to live apart from them, to set up house on my own.

*The women start as if to go to her. Bibi stops them.*

BIBI

Don't worry, it's not as if they've locked me in here.

CHORUS

What about finding your husband?

How do you expect to charm a man sitting up here all day?

BIBI

The world begins at the bottom of the stairs. Now I am free to discover life as I please.

*Bibi is alone in her space. Music. She dreams. In her dream it is raining marigolds. Haldar and his wife are buried beneath them. Bibi showers herself in marigolds. She holds one and gently and sensually runs it along her brown, the line of her nose, her lips. She turns and we see she is pregnant.*

CHORUS

Behind her unlocked tin door, we found Bibi four months pregnant. She would not tell us who had done it.

*Two women in the chorus cross to her. Bibi labors with their help. She gives birth and they hand her the baby. She cradles it with delight and awe. The women cross away from her leaving her alone in her storage room.*

For years afterward, we wondered who in our town had disgraced her.

Possible suspects were debated and dismissed.

But there was no point carrying out an investigation.

She was, to the best of our knowledge, cured.

*Pin spot on Bibi. She looks from the baby to the audience with a smile. Lights dim.  
Music grows.*