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Jeanne d'Arc

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Jeanne d'Arc Reflective Essay

“One life is all we have and we live it as we believe in living it. But to sacrifice what you are and to live without belief, that is a fate more terrible than dying.” In all the times I have tried to summarize the heart of my project for distant relatives, the notes I have written for the program, my proposal, my summary, this essay, I have never come up with anything so succinctly eloquent as these words. Nothing cuts through to the heart of my exploration so accurately. Nothing is so candid yet graceful, brief yet profound. Fittingly, these words are Joan’s own.

My original proposal, vague as it was, was to create an original piece of theatre that explored faith, violence, and the (unfortunately pervasive) link between the two. I do not see this as an area too often ventured into by the modern theatre, though it is still painfully relevant to our world. Last year, I had the good fortune to witness a staging of *Valiant*, an original piece by SU alumna Lanna Joffrey. In this harrowing account of war, real women were interviewed, and their words were presented by actors in narrative form. There were representatives from nearly every major world conflict that has affected today’s world citizens: from the survivor of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima to a female sniper for the KGB to a guerrilla fighter in El Salvador. Few pieces of theatre have ever impressed on me so clearly the horrors human beings are capable of inflicting upon each other, but also the truly indefatigable nature of the human spirit. I was reminded of Anna Devere Smith’s *Twilight*, a similar piece presenting interviews from the witnesses and victims of the 1992 Rodney King

riots in Los Angeles. I thought I could create 'interview theatre' as well, and decided to interview members of all different religions to present their opinions about world religious conflicts and what part their god or gods have in the violence.

In beginning my research and preparation, however, it became immediately apparent that this was not going to work for me in quite the same way as for Lanna Joffrey (whose work was based off of Sally Hayton-Keeva's book *Valient Women in War and Exile*) or Anna Deveare Smith. There were several problems. Firstly, I aimed for much too wide a scope. I needed to narrow my focus to be able to really pinpoint my observations. I wanted to focus on maybe one or two specific conflicts. Secondly, any people I would interview would be from the United States or England, where I began doing my research. While I am sure I could have found immigrants, refugees, and their children, few of the people in these safe, western nations would have any immediacy in their perspectives on religious conflict. Thirdly, this being my freshman attempt at playwriting, I needed a character-driven narrative in order to achieve an appropriate arc. I felt that a string of monologues, while motivated by a common theme, would have too little connectivity, and was afraid of creating something disjointed.

So I set about looking for a single character with an immediate connection to a specific religious conflict. And then, one rainy morning in my London acting class, Professor Rodney Hudson mentioned Joan of Arc. He was talking about what a fascinating character she is, how every playwright has such a different take

on her. And she has certainly been celebrated on the stage: Shakespeare's *Henry VI Part I*, Jean Anouilh's *The Lark*, Shaw's *St. Joan*, Brecht's *St. Joan of the Stockyards*, Tchaikovsky's *The Maid of Orleans*, Verdi's *Giovanna D'Arco*...the list goes on. I began to think what it was about this woman that so captured the imagination of these great minds. Her story is certainly incredible, yes, but so many people have incredible stories. I think it is the unique paradox she presents: a girl defeating an empire. The child who speaks to angels and rides with soldiers. The vassal of God: the bringer of death.

Well, of course she was the perfect candidate for my examination. And so I began to research her, and found her to be a treasure trove beyond my wildest dreams. Every page I read in every biography held information too wild to possibly be true. I found myself asking what all those playwrights before me asked: who was this incredible woman?

Yet I had a problem. I wanted to make the play relevant to my modern audience, and Joan, being some six hundred years out of date, is easy for an audience to write off as archaic and not at all like themselves. But then I struck upon the idea of having her tell the story of a modern day religious fighter: a Palestinian female suicide bomber. It was perfect: Joan brings her into a western context, and she brings Joan into a twenty-first century context.

In researching female suicide bombers, I came across several stories that caught my attention, but it was the story of Ayat al-Akhras that stayed with me. She killed herself and two other people only eleven days after her eighteenth birthday, the age at which Joan was leading troops in battle, standing trial, and

facing death. Then there were the details so graphically ironic that they wrench the gut to think of: one of her two victims was Rachel Levy, an Israeli girl so close to her in age and looks that coroners couldn't tell them apart. Victim and murderer, indistinguishable. It seems almost a microcosm of the conflict in the Holy Land: who can tell which side is the aggressor and which the defender? Who remembers how the fighting started? And who can say when it will end?

Ayat provided food for some serious thought. Unlike some other suicide bombers, she was not raised in a particularly radical household or encouraged to uphold the family honor. Virtues such as honor and discipline were a part of her culture and upbringing, yes, but as far as I can tell, nothing set her apart as more likely to become a suicide bomber than the next teenage girl.

In fact, as I learned, the profile of a suicide bomber is shockingly vague. In her book *Female Suicide Bombers*, Rosemarie Skaine asserts that "Suicide bombers now come from a range of lifestyles and have diverse characteristics. The bomber may be college educated or uneducated, married or single, man or woman, socially isolated or integrated, 13 years old or 47" (26). This is different than, for instance, the most publicized form of American terrorism: the school shooter. These tend to be socially awkward teenage boys, the bullies and outcasts. It is scary not to be able to pin a label on the suicide bomber; like ghosts, they move in shadows and can pop up in any part of society.

Some families push their children to become suicide bombers, and frame pictures of their "martyrs." Some mothers rejoice when they are told of their children's deaths, wishing for nothing more than that their next child may follow

the same example. Ayat's family was not one of these. Her parents were not proponents of suicide bombings. Her father said of her actions, "Words cannot express the pain I feel...If she had just told me what she was planning, I would have stopped her...May God forgive her for what she has done" (*Newsweek*). She was not brainwashed. She made a solemn, calculated choice that no one forced her into. This made her the kind of story I wanted to tell. Ayat is certainly a strong character. I personally do honestly respect her conviction, though I find what she did to be horrific. But the fact stands that no one coerced her or manipulated her or even suggested she should do this. In a way, that she came up with the idea all on her own is all the more terrifying, but it connected her to Joan, who had to fight alone against enormous odds to achieve the things she did.

In writing the script, I began by writing Joan's story, and then essentially rewrote the whole thing to include Ayat. It was an interesting process. I got to know Joan so well that telling Ayat's story in Joan's words was almost surprising; it seems mad, but characters have a life of their own, and I was a little disturbed by how much Joan admires Ayat, though she professes to disdain her unholy actions. But there is a singular understanding between the two. In the same way that two veterans of war can connect to each other even if they have never met, Ayat and Joan have common experiences of violence, witnessed from the seeming impotence of womanhood, that have driven them to astounding feats of strength and destruction.

So, to sum up: the original version of the script was just Joan's story. The original revised version was Joan's story, followed by Joan telling Ayat's story.

The revised revised version is what I have now: Joan's story and Ayat's, intertwined. The focus, of course, is Joan. I did this because, from a practical standpoint, there is more information available on her life, she is a more recognizable figure, and her story is frankly more interesting, with many stages, twists and turns of plot. Ayat's story is fairly short: she was angry, and she blew herself up. But it would be entirely possible to reverse the play: to have Ayat be the protagonist and have her tell Joan's story in support of her own. In fact, I may at some point explore writing that play as a sort of companion piece for this one. But for now, I am sticking with Joan.

Why? That's a tough question to ask, because it deals with intangibles. It becomes very hard to write an academic paper on art for this reason: it isn't the use of line or composition or chiaroscuro that makes the Mona Lisa great. It's something that you can't say. And it's not the amount of information or notoriety or interesting plot that makes Joan's life worth loving. Because I do love this woman, I really do. She has qualities I admire deeply, things I seek to emulate. Her absolute conviction. Her childlike belief. Her unfailing candor.

I am a thinker, a dreamer, a worrier. I love playing Joan because she sees the most direct path through any obstacle and never questions whether there even is another route. Simple is always better to her. It is in her letters, her military strategy, and her speech. She never merely suggested or insinuated a thing. Her very first act as a military leader was to write a letter: "King of England, if you do not [surrender], I am the commander of the military; and in whatever place I shall find your men in France, I will make them flee the country...and if they will not

obey, the Maid will have them all killed.” (jeanne-darc.dk) Her military strategy, in every battle she fought, was to attack, charge, directly at the enemy. She never tried to go around the back way or set a trap or avoid a battle. Why go ten miles around the town if there was a drawbridge straight ahead? Never mind that the bridge was guarded by a hundred men. It seemed foolhardy to the military advisors, but then, clearly their methods of sitting and waiting for the best opportunity to present itself weren't working.

Joan's brilliance came from the fact that she didn't stop to calculate or think. The men were swept up in her fervor, and hope was restored to a tired army. Of course, it was also this candid boldness that may have cost Joan her life; she could never stop herself from telling the absolute truth, nor would she ever try to, not though it should condemn her. But still, I find myself constantly compelled by her dauntless honesty. “If you knew more about me, you might wish me out of your hands.” “All the English will be driven from France, except for those who die here.” And the all-too-telling, “children say that people are sometimes hanged for saying the truth.” (jeanne-darc.dk)

I consider myself to be so privileged to be working with a woman like Joan; she is a force of nature, the sort of role every actor dreams of getting a chance at. And to have her for the dual processes of writing and acting has been incredible. I now know her better than any character I have ever played before. She has been in my head for a year now, first through the research, then the writing, and finally the acting.

This is my favorite part, in the end. I love learning, so research was intensely interesting. I love writing, so I had a lot of fun monkeying with the script. But I am an acting major for a reason. It is my first love, and the part I looked forward to the most: getting onstage every night and being Joan.

I discovered that I knew Joan more deeply than I have ever known a character before the day I realized how much I still cannot (and may never) understand about her. Through so much of this process, she remained strangely elusive to me. She is deeply complex and mysterious.

In acting, there are two ways to go about building a character: from the inside out, or from the outside in. Some actors find a costume piece, a prop, a mannerism, or an accent, and use that as the foundation of their character. For instance, there is the old story of Charlie Chaplin. He went through a costume warehouse one day, trying things on at random. He found a pair of pants and some shoes that were far too big on him. He started experimenting with them. He mirrored their movement, becoming loose and erratic. Then he found a shirt and vest that were too tight. He mirrored them too, with a stiff walk and poker-like posture. He put the two together and formed the tramp character we know so well today. His upper half reflects the straight-laced societal mores of the era, but his lower half betrays an inner chaos which always gets the better of him.

I usually work the opposite way, from the inside out. I first come to understand the characters motivations, their history, their thoughts. These things become manifest in their behavior. If I am playing an alcoholic, I don't start by stumbling around, I start by asking what drove this person to drink. I thought this

would be easy for building Joan, because I began by writing it. My initial research on her choices and discoveries was largely done before I ever brought my acting brain to the table.

But my system failed me. For some reason, I couldn't get a grasp on her. My voice didn't sound like hers to me. I couldn't look into a mirror and see anyone other than Megan pretending to be Joan. I thought very hard about it. I decided that, since she was trying to cram herself into a man's world, she would have needed to follow masculine rules. Carrying something as powerful as a sword meant she would feel more strongly about her hands than I do. I am a painter; I consider my hands to be delicate instruments of fine specificity. She would have considered hers to be weapons: strong and blunt. She wore her armor almost interminably; she used to sleep in it in the field to protect her modesty against her own men. Therefore, she would be used to carrying a lot of weight. She would have a lower center of gravity, because she needed a sturdy balance. She was said to be a great swordswoman, and I imagine her to have a martial bearing.

And her voice! She needed it to carry across a battle field. She needed men to listen to her. She needed to sound strong and capable and confident. So I spent hours walking in her shoes, trying to find her in my physical body. Wider stance: she doesn't apologize for taking up room, but tries to make herself as big as possible, so she can hold her own with the men. Better posture: she is absolutely confident in her divine commission. Deeper voice: she is a woman who commands thousands of men.

But it didn't work. I spent a good month being very frustrated, not able to figure out what I was missing. And then one day, playing games and doing random things, anything that might help me hit on a clue to her life, I discovered how to go about it.

The actual words that I know Joan spoke are not English. They are French. I started reading them out loud. That is when I found the key: I had to teach her English.

Now, this all sounds very schizophrenic. After all, I don't speak French. I have never taken a French class. I seem to recall being laughed at a lot the time I visited Paris. But nonetheless, it was what Joan wanted.

I started using the words of the Marseillaise as a monologue. I would be Joan, giving her troops the pep talk that you always see generals in movies giving their soldiers before the big battle (and I like to think it happens in real life too). Then I would translate it into English, slowly (I speak enough Spanish that I can at least read French). In English, my rough translation sounded like this:

Arise, children of the Fatherland!

The day of glory has arrived!

Against us, the bloody standard of tyranny has been raised!

Do you hear in the countryside

The cries of the ferocious soldiers?

They have come right into your midst

To devour your sons, your wives.

To arms, citizens!
Form your battalions!
March on, march on,
Oh, how the impure blood
Shall fill our ditches!

The funny thing about the French national anthem is that it was written during the Reign of Terror. Now, the Reign of Terror not only cost a lot of heads, but a lot of national relics. A lot of Joan's possessions (her standard, her armor, her clothing) were in the National Treasury until this time, when they were hauled out for destruction. Yet the words of the song apply so much better to the Hundred Year's War than to the Revolution. No one was invading France during the Revolution. I think it is ironic that the people who destroyed so much of Joan's history gloried in the values that she embodied.

Anyway, it was with that song (and the fact that I've watched *Casablanca* enough times to have it memorized, but that's a different story) that I finally was able to feel like Joan. I realized that all those other things I did, like trying to make her voice deeper, were just imposed assumptions about what she would be like.

In fact, the Joan I ended up creating didn't have a deeper voice. Rather, she had an incredible access to the range of her voice. When she was just speaking naturally, it is true that her voice sat at a lower optimal pitch than mine does. But every emotion moved her into completely different places vocally. When she was angry, which was usually because she felt her power in some way

stripped away or denied, she tended to sink very low into her range. When she was scared, she felt the most like a woman, and it went very high.

This was the most vocally demanding show I've ever done, and not just because I was the only one talking for an hour (although it did require tremendous stamina). I needed a high level of access to all areas of resonance. In vocal pedagogy, resonators are areas of the body that pick up vibrations particularly well. They can be used by the vocally savvy to magnify or modify the tone, pitch, and volume of the voice. Resonators tend to be hard surfaces, such as bone or cartilage, that will bounce back sound. It is therefore not just the shape and size of one's vocal chords, but also the shape and size of the body, and in particular the face, that creates the unique sound of each human voice.

In order to survive this show with my voice intact, I needed to employ all the training I have received over the past four years. In order to preserve my voice, I was much more aware of vocal hygiene than I normally am. I took days of vocal rest, a monk-like vow of silence. I kept myself well hydrated. I drank green tea with ginger and pineapple juice. I upped my zinc intake. I did a half an hour to an hour warm up every time I ran the show. This mostly focused on increasing my breath capacity, a continual bane for me. I have a tiny ribcage, and this show required an enormous amount of breath. Releasing physical tension was an absolute must. I can't breathe properly if I'm not relaxed. And then I would find access to resonance. When she was angry, I found chest resonance to be the most useful. Scared meant sinus and skull resonance; finding vibration in

my frontal, parietal, occipital, and sphenoid bones (all located in the skull). When she was frustrated, everything came right off my cheekbones.

This wasn't something I did consciously; it was ingrained in me through four years of training. I merely opened the channel through my warm-ups, so her voice was free to express exactly what she was feeling.

That is one of the things I find miraculous in acting. It wasn't my voice. Well, it was, technically, but when I am on stage, I give myself over to her. I sacrifice myself. I am a sort of spiritual conduit, like Whoopi Goldberg in *Ghost*. I suppose a lot of this must sound absolutely insane to the general public, but hey, I was playing Joan of Arc. At least I didn't actually hear voices. (There are a lot of actors who might. Don't push the sanity issues in the theatre.)

After I found her character and was ready to hit the text with it, I began the next stage of acting. We call it 'putting it on its feet,' or blocking. This was a hard process for this show for a couple different reasons. For one thing, this was a one person show. Nothing demanded that I move at all, except the attention span of the audience. For another thing, I wrote it as a monologue, sitting at my computer. I wrote in no stage directions, nor even design cues. And lastly, this ended up being a piece without a director.

In the end, if there was one area where the play suffered that I would go back and change, it would be to give it a director. I very keenly felt the lack of an external eye. One of the things I love the best about theatre that I sacrificed for this project was the collaborative aspect. I love ensemble-driven plays or films. Acting them or watching them, there is something so compelling about the

interaction of minds. I love that so many disparate brains come up with wildly different ideas that somehow mesh into a wholly integrated piece of art. I hate workshop paintings because the point of view is either nonexistent or a mere soulless clone, but I love collaborative theatre because the point of view is expanded by what everyone brings to the table.

Most of the time, I was rehearsing this in a room by myself. Once a week, I would take it in to Geri Clark, my advisor, for feedback, and I did the same thing with Tim Davis-Reed, my Honors Reader, but that was just feedback on my ideas, it wasn't new ideas. While I am immensely proud to be able to say that everything you saw and heard came from me and me alone, from the writing to the acting to the direction, I still feel that the play suffered because my ideas are limited to what is in my head. Which is good and valid, but limited.

I was very lucky to have Geri and Tim, though. They are wonderful professionals with acutely discerning eyes. Tim happens to be a bladed weapons expert, so we spent a lot of office hours teaching skinny, girly Megan how to use a sword. He was endlessly patient. The big thing I took from Geri was one of the first pieces of advice she gave me, repeated endlessly through the months: just talk. It sounds obvious, but it is amazing how little actors do it, and how hard it was for me to forget stage convention. Joan is a peasant. The great thing about her, as I said earlier, is her lack of guile. She isn't above anyone or hiding anything. She is candidly honest, and if I failed to be that way in my acting, even for a minute, I could feel the play flopping.

I consider this project to be a sort of triathlon. The first leg was writing. The second acting. The third, which I ran simultaneously with the second, was producing. I won't go too much into this, because it's the boring part. Most of it was meetings and emails, phone calls and mindless errands, a thousand tiny things to consider. Securing a venue, setting a date, advertising, all that. The fun part was the design element.

As I said, I love collaboration. The only part of this project I felt was truly collaborative was the design. I had three designers working for me: sound designer, a lighting designer, and a costume/set designer.

The sound design was very simple. Row Walters was the designer, and she found me two bell cues. The one at the beginning needed to be raucously ebullient. The one at the end needed to be ominous and overwhelming. She found me the Sunday bells from Westminster Abbey (a little secret that made me love them more, because of my semester in London), and a single, solemn funeral bell. Perfect.

The lighting design ended up not being too complicated either. Christine Bernat refocused the lights that already hung in my space. We talked about using stained glass windows as a sort of reference point. For one thing, they obviously tie in with Joan's whole religious nature, but they also employ wonderfully saturated color. Hints of these beautiful jewel tones helped us pick out moods: amber created a happy, hopeful affect at the opening of the show, mournful blue lit the background after Joan was captured and put in prison. My favorite was my special (what we call a really cool lighting affect that is only used a few rare times

in the show, in this case a spotlight). My special was downstage right, in the 'sweet spot,' the part of the stage that was the strongest. As the set was a wall sitting upstage left, anyone standing on that spot instantly gave balance to the stage picture (being a painter makes you a much better director, because you understand visual composition and geometry). The special was a mixture of different colors, all warm and primarily red. Christine and I worked together to bring it up three times in the show. All three were very important moments, and just happened to be my favorite parts (I wrote them the best because they were so important). It was at the very beginning when she hears the bells, exactly halfway through when she first goes to battle, and at the end when she is burned. As a side note, I was impressed with my own writing skills when I noticed I had spaced out the climaxes so evenly. These were also all times when Joan seems to retreat out of the present into a reality in her own head. The lighting reflected her emotional and mental state. It was bloody, intense, and dreamlike.

My show was not ever meant to be historically accurate in terms of design (the script is – I didn't change any facts). It takes place in some sort of afterlife limbo. I didn't want it to be either heaven or hell; I didn't want to comment on anybody's view of the afterlife. It takes place present day, and Joan is aware of everything that has happened since her death. I wanted the design to be evocative rather than accurate, with elements of medieval France, modern-day America, and the Middle East to blend together.

The set was, as I have said, a wall. It was painted to evoke a castle wall, with its large stones. It was painted a sandy color, which Lauren Levesque, my

set and costume designer, later told me was for a couple different reasons. It not only suggested the Middle Eastern desert, tying Ayat into the picture, but also offset the white of the costume. She was playing with lights and neutrals, but the only pure white on my set was my costume. She even built my standard out of undyed muslin so it wouldn't be pure white.

But of everything, my costume was my favorite part of the design. I needed pants because I needed to be able to move, and because Joan is much more comfortable in men's clothing. I wanted it to be white because she died in white. Lauren took those two pieces of information and did some research of her own. Between images I gave her and the ones she found, she came up with a beautiful concept.

She brought me a sketch of a very structured costume. With white skinny jeans, flat boots, and long sleeves, which we bought, she paired a jacket, which she designed and made for me. The whole ensemble incorporated the silhouette of Joan's armor (which was said to be white, as it was made of highly polished steel). The jacket's high collar, cap sleeves, cinched waist, and full skirt were perfectly executed to give a disciplined, militaristic feel to the outfit. The belt, which Lauren also built for me, fit the scabbard of my sword, so I could wear it throughout the show, which I had not anticipated being able to do.

When I put on my costume, I felt so powerful. It was an intimidating look, all that white with little accents of black in the boots, belt, and the gloves I used to suggest gauntlets. The little embellishments, such as fleur-de-lis buttons, completed the look. I felt imposing and authoritative and all in all ready to

command an army. I never could have imagined it on my own, but it was just what I needed. That's the power of collaboration!

Once the three legs of the triathlon were complete, there was nothing left to do but to perform it. It was ready.

I have never in my life done anything like performing this show. I considered it a crucible, a test of my own inner strength. It is terrifying to do a one-hander; if you fall, there is no one there to help you up. Add that to the fact that I was performing my own work, and I was very aware that if anything was not perfect, there was no one to blame but me.

For me, everything that I have ever learned about theatre, everything I have ever wanted to give the world, everything that I am went into this show. This was the culmination of my education, well, of my whole life so far, really. For an actor, there is no separation between craft and life. We live and breathe the theatre, and we pour our hearts and souls into every minute of each night. Something as beautiful as art demands nothing less than your whole self, and how can you deny your muse?

But as scary as it was, there was something deeper than the fear that kept me from turning and running. It was Joan. It was the need to tell her story, which is really what the whole thing is about. The only thing human beings have, in the end, is their story. I am a storyteller. That is, to me, a sacred calling.

I am glad I had her. She is braver than I am. She is stronger than I am. I couldn't have done this without her. I let her breathe through my lungs for a short hour. I hope I touched someone. I hope I made someone think. I hope I did

justice to this incredible woman. She won't ever leave me. I won't let her. I will continue working on this piece maybe for the rest of my life. Is it a masterpiece? I have no idea. But it is my masterpiece, the culmination of all my life and love and soul. And, as actors do, I bequeath it to you, in the hopes that it touches your life and love and soul.

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Jeanne D'Arc

Church bells pealing. Joan walks onstage, smiling.

JOAN. It's always with the bells that they come. The sweet, sweet music of the holy bells, ringing through the valley. In Domremy, we lived our lives to the sound of the bells. They rang in the matins and out the vespers, sounding in every hour and a special tune for midday. They called us together to worship. They were the soundtrack to our lives, long before iPods were thought of. A christening, a first holy communion, a wedding, a funeral: all the landmarks of our lives were right there in the music. They told us who we were in a time when no one knew: Burgundians? Armagnacs? Frenchmen? No! Children of God, they told us. And if you were ever lost in the dark, the sound of the bells would guide you home.

The bells in their tower were pretty much the tallest thing we knew of, aside from the castle at Vaucouleurs. Our houses were flat little mud huts, long and narrow and close to the clay from whence we came. I always thought that my poor mortal soul was bound to earth, but the bells...well, they just soared. The closest anything made by man could get to heaven.

So of course it was with the bells that they came. The voices. First it was just one. The wise counselor...I knew later that he was Michael, the archangel. He introduced me to Margaret and Catherine, my dearest saints. It was they who gave me God's instructions: "You must save France."

Okay, this is not to question God's instructions or anything; I would never dream of doing that of course. But at the time, I thought God would have been

making a mistake, were that possible. I mean, me? God chooses kings and knights to carry out his bidding. Grand, important people. Me? I was from the middle of nowhere. My father was a farmer. We weren't destitute, but we were pretty poor. I was illiterate. I was a girl at the time in history when women had the fewest rights and opportunities ever. And, at the time my saints first appeared to me, I was ten years old. There was no person less likely to be the chosen redeemer of France.

But I believed. You know, I think my greatest talent has never been cleverness or strength at arms. I think it was always my conviction. Things are as simple to me now, almost six hundred years later, as they were to my child's mind then. And where there is true conviction, there must be determination. That's my strength. Nothing could ever stop me or get in my way once I really set my mind to something. Sure, I got discouraged. But look! Nicholas Sarkozy is not the president of Burgundy or Lorraine, but of France. A whole, united France. That would not exist if it weren't for God's will at work in this small, common, woman's body.

There aren't many people like me left today. People don't take the iPod out of their ears long enough to hear God's call. Like in the Bible, when Elijah goes to meet God, and first there is a great wind, then an earthquake, then a fire. But God isn't in any of these things. And then after these mighty catastrophes, there is a whisper. And God is in the whisper. God is in the bells. People don't listen to stillness. It's gone from them these days.

Now, there are some...take these jihadists, these suicide bombers and fundamentalists. They have the strength of will, the true passion and discipline real faith requires. But they are misguided. If they were fighting for the Lord Jesus Christ, they would be on the path.

Take for instance a Palestinian girl, seventeen, eighteen years old---the same age I was when I was fighting the English---a girl named Ayat al-Akhras. Raised in a refugee camp, only four miles from Bethlehem. Lived in squalor and fear. On the other side of the wall, shopping malls and burger joints: all the amenities of modern luxury. Saw her neighbors killed, their houses destroyed by the Israeli army. Ayat was a pretty girl, happy, bright. She could have been me, in another place and time. She was fiercely loyal and very passionate. Was going to go to college to become a journalist. She was just as dedicated to her religious ideals as I still am to mine; the only difference is that I was fighting for Jesus Christ and she was fighting for...Allah. And if she were a Christian child, maybe God would have chosen her, too, the way He chose me. Who knows.

But as it worked out, we were born six hundred years apart in different corners of the world, with different wars knocking at our doors.

My war was what your history teachers call the Hundred Years' War. My mission was to end it. It had been...you know, a hundred years. It was time for peace in France again. And God knew it wouldn't come until the English were gone, so he sent me to get them out.

Now, I'm not saying God hates the English or the Israelis. I don't know anything about God's relationship with the English, and I don't really care to. I

just know that God thought they were being greedy, trying to conquer France. And so much blood was spilled over a mere political argument. You know, I think sometimes that if the people who want power want it badly enough to kill for it, we should just put them in a room with swords and let them go at it. But generations of men were slaughtered while kings sat in their halls, moving their troops like chessmen on their maps. And God had enough. Englishmen back to England, and Charles VII, the rightful French king on the throne. That was how it should be.

But Charles VII couldn't be king without a coronation. Everything back then depended on ceremony. Trouble was, the cathedral where French kings have always been crowned was in the city of Rheims, deep in English territory. And meanwhile, France was falling apart!

Charles VII's father was a madman, whose fits of lunacy ruined French chances in the war. After his death, France was exhausted of money, men, resources, and hope. The Black Death killed off half the army, and the English the other half. Then the Duke of Burgundy, cousin of Charles VII, decided to try for the throne himself; he claimed Charles was a bastard, and led his Burgundian army against his own countrymen. France was torn in two at a time when we needed nothing so much as unity. And the English took advantage: snapping up pieces of our broken country, terrorizing civilians, raping women and slaughtering children.

So my saints put me on my path. Save France. I was supposed to free French land from the English, conquering until I reached Rheims, where I would

help crown the Dauphin. I think the hardest part was getting the wheels into motion; starting out in the first place. It meant a lot of fooling my father...not lying! I wouldn't do that. But...well, evasion. I'm a military person, so I was pretty good at it. Save France. It took me well over a year to get started. I got turned away again and again, and I kept having to sneak around, but I finally got Sir Robert de Baudricourt, the captain at Vaucouleurs, to give the ok for me to visit Charles, the Dauphin, where he was holding court at Chinon.

Feeling like something was finally happening. Isn't that a great feeling? You know it. When all the pieces click into place and your life is moving forward. Your purpose. Some people find it in relationships or in careers. I found it in military action. The Palestinian girl Ayat found it in politics. Oh yes, she became very politically motivated. As she got older, her plans started moving. Straight A's meant journalism school was going to be a reality. She was engaged; her wedding date was set for July of 2002. And she was going to be the one who changed the world, who told Palestine's story to all the nations.

But war never waits for you to be ready, and its bite is cruel. I had known that for years. Ayat knows now too. Her three cousins were militants, members of Hamas, and all three were killed in Gaza. After that, Ayat felt the call, the one I felt, to not sit by and watch anymore. She joined a radical group called Al-Aqsa, a group of violence and hate. And her training began. She was on her way.

We were on our way, my small company and I. It was dangerous country, plagued with bandits and enemy soldiers, but I knew that the Lord God's plan for me was to keep me safe, so I wasn't afraid. Nevertheless, we decided it was a

good idea for me to dress as a boy, because the country is especially dangerous for women, and besides, boy's clothing is so much easier to move in, and I wanted to be on my toes in case we did run into any Godons. The Godons were what we used to call the English soldiers, on account of how they always said these funny English words, "God-damn," which they tell me is a curse word. You can always tell an evil person by whether or not they take the Lord's name in vain, and there is the proof that the entire English army was just out and out evil, and God wanted them off our land.

And just as I said, God delivered me safely to Chinon, to the Dauphin. It was terrifying: walking through stone halls grander than anything I had ever dreamed of even, past lords and ladies all far better bred than I was. And in the Hall of State, the light of fifty torches shone on the rich fabrics of the three hundred nobles assembled. But the man who sat in the seat of honor was wrong. I don't know how I knew. He was the biggest and most richly dressed and important-looking person there, but he looked out-of-place. They may as well have dressed up the royal hounds in the king's clothing, it was that obvious. So instead of bowing, I turned and looked at the crowd. The men of my party were astounded, and began to make excuses for my rudeness to the clown on the throne. But I searched until I found him, dressed almost as simply as I was.

He was thin and very weak-looking. Scrawny, with a big nose and sort of protruding eyes that were too pale, and his eyebrows were also really pale, so that he looked surprised. Which he probably was, that I was even looking at him at all. But I knew him at once. And so I made my obeisance, like they had told me

to, and said, “your Majesty.” He said, “I am not the Dauphin. He is over there, on the throne.” But he couldn’t fool me. I said no. I said, “You are the Dauphin, and only you.” And he was so shocked, he looked even more surprised than normal. He said, “Who are you?” And I said, “Jeheanne la Pucelle. Joan the Maid. God has told me to deliver your kingdom from the hands of the usurpers, and to bring you to Rheims to be crowned King of France.”

There was an echoing silence, but I didn’t mind, since I can always find God in silence.

Charles didn’t smile or even blink, and the stare of those unnaturally light eyes was uncomfortable, but it wasn’t mistrustful or accusatory, and so I looked right back.

Later I learned that this was how he looked when making a decision, and that it was that very moment when he decided to put all the hopes he had left for France on my shoulders.

When he told this to his advisors, they (naturally) raised some pretty strong objections. They said all sorts of things: that I was crazy, that I was lying, I was a spy, a harlot, all sorts of things. They subjected me to all these tests. They performed exorcisms and had doctors examine my mental and physical health. They had women examine me, too, to prove I was a virgin. They questioned me very thoroughly, more thoroughly than anyone up until my trial at Rouen. I remember being asked what language my voices spoke in. I said, ‘French, of course.’ All the old cardinals and doctors of philosophy turned and muttered amongst themselves. I didn’t know why. Why would they speak in

Greek or Latin or Aramaic, even if they are the languages of the Bible? Do I speak Greek? Do I know Latin? No! They spoke so I could understand. They come from God; do you think God can't speak French?

I bore all these humiliations with patience, because my voices told me to. I had always known I would be the subject of a whole lot of criticism. I still am, even to this day. They still say I was crazy or a lewd woman. Modern day doctors try to explain away my voices as symptoms of some disease. Hallucinations. I am a schizophrenic. An epileptic. I suffered from migraines. Tuberculosis. I love that one. Tuberculosis. I raised a full-scale siege on France with advanced Tuberculosis.

I am not mad. Charles VII would not have patronized a madwoman. The son of Charles VI? Charles the Mad? Whose fits ruined France? No, he made sure I was completely sane before giving me even the least bit of benefit of the doubt. So did all those cardinals. But in the end, not one of those fussy old men had a shred of an argument against me.

The one thing I had going for me (aside from God) was that they had nothing to lose. The French army was being defeated anyways. Before I came on the scene, the plan was to surrender not only Orleans, but also Blois, Anjou, and Touraine to the English. I was, I suppose, a last-ditch effort that no one expected to succeed. Why patronize a woman? They never do. The Hamas leaders in Palestine refused to allow Ayat into their ranks, though one did say that "we will start using women when we have run out of men." They don't think people like Ayat or me are good enough to fight for them, even though I was called by God!

Good. Good. Better. I have always liked proving people wrong, especially when they doubt God.

I was given the rank of senior officer and the task of getting supplies into the besieged city of Orleans. I thought it was a bit juvenile, to give me a mission so obviously designed to be a trial of my capabilities. Didn't they understand? If God had wanted someone for the job who could do it on their own, he wouldn't have picked a woman, he would have picked a trained warrior. But my capabilities didn't matter. I could have walked through the English line unscathed and not because I'm strong or smart, but because I have God with me. So in testing me, they were testing God. 'Thou shalt not put the Lord, thy God to the test.' But anyways.

You see, that is the difference between me and Ayat. I was called by God. God told me to do the things I did. Ayat was called by...well, something else. By the horror of her past or by her upbringing...my parents taught me to be true to God, and it shows in my upbringing. Hers must have taught her to not question a prompting by the devil. It's always the parents, although I think Ayat was old enough to act for herself, and she should have recognized what she was being asked and said, "Get behind me, Satan!"

I first saw Orleans, a walled city of about fifteen thousand Christian souls...that was big in those days, don't scoff...from the high ground outside the city. I can't remember what I thought at that moment. Whether it was fear or satisfaction I felt or whether I was just calculating the best route into the city. I don't know. But I had put my faith in God, and there it stayed, and God led my

reinforcements right through the lion's den, under the noses of the Godons, into the city.

Once I was inside the city, I was welcomed by the nearly-starving troops. Then I was taken to meet the Bastard. Don't laugh, that was his name. The Bastard of Orleans. Seriously. The man could kill you with his thumbs.

He was the illegitimate son of the Duke, and even though his real name was Jean de Dunois, everyone called him the Bastard. He was a good man, though, and a great soldier. He was a little mistrustful and irritatingly stubborn, but a good man. He hated me at first, because he was very proud and didn't like a woman having any authority, but in the end, we...well, we were never friends, really, and we never stopped arguing, but I sort of think he went from hating me to loving our arguments. One or two times he'd seek me out just to fight, and a couple of times we started fighting about nothing at all. And he always looked disappointed when we stopped, even if it was because he won.

The Bastard was a strange man like that. Not likeable, no, much too gruff and aloof for friendship, but...I've had a lot of friends, and no one I'd trust with my life half so much as him.

Anyway, the day I got there was the day we had our first fight. He told me I was a silly little girl and should go home to mommy. He said someone should find me a husband to put me in my place, that girls like me just needed a good smack. Well. I turned around and marched out of the city onto the bridge, stopped there, and shouted to the entire English army that they should go home now, or they would have to deal with me. They laughed and called me a lot of

rude names, and when the Bastard saw that he yelled at me about the formalities of war and did I know anything, but he never looked at me the same. I think I earned his respect. I think that sort of cheek was in him, too, and he'd been wanting to say that to the Godons for a long time.

Come to think of it, Ayat did pretty much the same thing. She made a tape of herself shaming the Palestinian authorities. "I say to the Arab leaders, 'Stop sleeping. Stop failing to fulfill your duty. Shame on the Arab armies who are sitting and watching the girls of Palestine fighting while they are asleep.'" That was what she said. The girl had guts, you have to give her that. Whatever she did, guts. I like that. I don't think I could have had the bravery to show the Bastard my courage if it weren't for my voices in my ear, whispering what to say. With them, it was inevitable that he would see God standing next to me.

But at first he excluded me from the war councils. I sat in my chambers for days, polishing my armor and my sword. I had been given swords by a few different people: Charles, Jean de Metz, people like that. But the one I wanted was the one that my voices told me to use. It was found in a chapel dedicated to Saint Catherine outside Chinon. Soldiers returning home used to leave their swords on altars to thank their saints for protection. This one was light, light enough for a woman anyway, and it had five fleurs-de-Lys down the scabbard. Saint Catherine told me where to find it. I had a sort of holy reverence for it; it was not my tool, I was its, because it was from God. For days, I sat running my fingers over the little flowers.

Then...my first battle. I awoke in the middle of the night from a dream in which my saints told me that French blood was being spilled. I couldn't hear anything, but I knew what must have been happening outside the city walls. The army was marching on Saint-Loup, a little bastille outside the city that the English were holding, and no one thought to call me. I needed to be out there. I yelled at my page, I dressed and armed myself as quickly as I could...my white armor, a steel so polished it gleamed white, my horse, a black charger, and my standard, which I nearly forgot.

My standard is important. I liked it much better than my sword. My sword was external, but my standard was a part of me, like an extension of my arm. It was pure white, and it had a scene of the Annunciation, with the angel Gabriel giving the Virgin Mary a fleur-de-Lys. It said, "Jhesus Maria." That ended up being my motto, sort of. My battle cry, my oath, my most desperate prayer.

War is...poets talk of it...Siegfried Sassoon likened World War I to a dragon; American Brian Turner called the bullets he fired in Iraq "where the world ends, every time." Apocalyptic talk. Like Revelation.

I had seen the result of war; I had seen the destruction of my town of Domremy, and heard the grief of the mothers whose sons were slaughtered. Ayat had watched her neighbor killed by a stray Israeli bullet while sitting in his front yard. But you can't know...I didn't know war until that night. The first signs were the wounded being carried off...then the wounded who lay waiting, for help or death it was hard to tell...then the dead. Every battle I've seen has looked

different, because of the number of people, the time of day, the landscape. Sometimes they are frighteningly loud, sometimes an eerie lull comes as soldiers tire and the wounded give up the ghost. But they all smell the same. The acrid smell of blood, the scorched flesh and earth, the smell of men whose bowels give out because of fear or death. The iron of the weapons and the powder of cannons; to Ayat I suppose they must have smelled a lot different, a lot more sterile, like plastic and chemicals or something. But always there is the smell of dirt and vomit and raw, bleeding flesh.

I didn't want to kill anybody. It was never my intention to take a life. I didn't like my sword or the terrible power it contained. But something took over me and guided my sword. And it wasn't God. It was some creature that lives in war, something feral and uncontained that lies dormant in everybody, even the shy farm girls of the world, and you never really know yourself until you realize that deep down you belong to it. It is ferocious and insatiable, and that night and the next day seemed to last forever. War is something beyond sleep and beyond time...it might have been a few hours or a whole week, I couldn't tell you.

I did what I had to do. I didn't think or question. Where my voices said slay, I slashed with my sword. Where they said, "look out!" I raised my shield. I have fought so much...after a while it becomes second nature. After a while I could see the face of God through the smoke again, saying, "That's right. Take them, take them all. Let not one Englishman stand when the dawn breaks."

What? You think I'm crazy? Yes, you do. Of course you do. You sit cozy in your safe homes and you've never felt the fear or the threat closing in on

you. We sought exile for years on an island to protect our children from slaughter and our women from rape, but we couldn't protect our lands from these things. The Godons took from us everything, Ayat grew up in a refugee camp, and I left my home forever, and you tell me, sitting fat on your free land, that fear like that, threat like that, wouldn't wake in you a holy anger. I know what it's like. Ayat knows what that is like. It angers God to see his children threatened. And when you feel the wrath of God surge through you, well, you wouldn't be sitting there complacent if you had. You would be fighting with everything you have and dying for the right.

I died for God. I did. I am proud of it. I subjected myself to the fires of this world to protect myself from the fires of the next. And I would do it again. Yes, no question, I would do it again. I have seen the face of God smiling, and I would brave things you can't imagine to sit in that presence. Would you?

No? Have times changed so much? Is there nothing you would die for? Then what is it that you live for? Silence again? But I don't hear God in that silence.

People like me know. People like Ayat, however mixed up their thinking, they still know. You have no idea.

When the dust settled, the French had captured Saint-Loup. My first victory. Ha! Suddenly I wasn't meeting mistrust or dismissal. The Bastard still hated me, and a few others had also hoped to find me proved wrong, but the men were willing to follow me anywhere. So they did. They followed me to Les Tourelles, where I took a crossbow bolt to the right shoulder. Isn't it strange?

With the adrenaline of a battle, you can't really feel a wound! I actually saw the arrow sprout from my neck and thought, 'good,' because they missed killing me. It bled a lot and hurt so badly I thought I might die once I got off the field, but in the rush of battle, a wound doesn't seem so bad. And weren't the Godons surprised! They thought I was going to die, but I met them again within days. We swept around Orleans, routing the English out of every last inch. It only took nine days. Nine days after my arrival, the English retreated, leaving Orleans in the hands of her true king.

That was the height of everything. We couldn't lose! We left Orleans to return to Charles. On the way, we conquered Jargeau---I took a cannonball to the head; it crushed my helmet but I was fine---Meung-sur-Loire, Beaugency, Patay...oh, Patay was I think the greatest success story I ever had. For every man we lost, the English lost ten. We had horses, they had none. After Patay, the Godons were running scared. When we got to Auxerre, the whole city surrendered without a fight.

God was on our side always. When we reached Troyes, things looked grim, because we were out of provisions. But it so happened that a wandering monk named Brother Richard had been through the area, preaching about the end of the world. He had convinced the townspeople to plant beans, which have an earlier harvest than their normal crops. You know, in case the world ended before the harvest. When the hungry army arrived, there was enough for everybody!

Troyes, too, surrendered without a drop of blood being shed. We quartered there for a few days before continuing our journey. We were very close

to Rheims when the burgesses of the city came out to meet us, handing the keys to the city to Charles! We hadn't even threatened a siege!

We set the date for the coronation for the day after we entered the city. July 16th. A Sunday. The Lord's day. Entering the cathedral for the first time was the finest moment of my life. 'Ancient French temple! Thou whose hundred kings watch over thee...' Do you like it? An American wrote that.

I stood by Charles the whole time, wearing my armor and bearing my standard. It was such a beautiful ceremony. The crowds of people in the cathedral, some of them weeping to see France with a king again...or maybe that was just me. They crowned him and anointed him with oil from the Sainte-Ampoule, a sacred flask from which all French kings are anointed. They say that no matter how many kings receive that oil, it will never run out. The power of God...

I look back on that day as a sort of golden moment, that last, shining pinnacle of glory. My life's mission was complete. All that I had been born to do was now accomplished. Everything that day was perfect, and the pride I felt...unspeakable.

But there is always a tomorrow. And I had never faced an empty one before. I was so young! I had raced around like...like Ayat, like the teenager that I was, impatient, never thinking, always rushing, rushing, running to the next thing, the next battle, the next city, the next task. It was so frustrating to see things left undone! But having nothing to do...that was worse. So much worse.

I felt small. And cold. And unimportant, so unimportant.

My voices stopped talking to me. What would they have said?

Everything was finished. Charles was negotiating with the English and with the Burgundians, trying to come to some sort of armistice.

No. No, that couldn't happen. It couldn't be over. My mission was to save France, right? To restore Charles VII his rightful kingdom. Crowning him was not enough. France was still not all free! So much of it was still in the hands of the usurpers. There were still cities to free and troops to lead and battles to be fought!

I urged the King not to give up the fight, but to continue my aggressive tactics that had won his throne for him. His councilors were advising a treaty, a stall, which would line their pockets and furnish their castles. But I pushed and nagged as hard as I could until finally Charles agreed to try an assault on Paris!

We attacked on the eighth of September. But without my voices, I no longer felt good about battle. I didn't fight for the first half of the day, and when I did begin to fight, I almost immediately took a crossbow bolt to the leg. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me! I lay on the field with that hideous arrow sticking out of me, and I couldn't stand. The only reason I knew I was still alive was the pain. It was like a sharp heat spreading through me, like whiskey, and it cleared my brain. I didn't want anyone to touch me or move me at all, because I didn't want my men to retreat. I knew if we could just press on, we could take the town, take Paris! The English troops were already retreating into the city. But night fell, and they carried me off the field, and my men followed, and we lost. We carried on the battle next day, but our chance was gone. I even got back on

my horse and fought myself with my wound, but it was over. And still my voices said nothing.

After my first defeat, I thought maybe God was telling me to retire, so I tried to leave, and spent a while in reflection and prayer. But God did not create someone like me to be locked in a cloister! I couldn't do it. Of all the things I have ever been capable of, sitting still is not one of them. So I left my retreat and rallied a few hundred men and captured Saint-Pierre. I moved from town to town like lightning, I couldn't sit down, couldn't rest. I can't stand the feeling of a battle being over. The minute I see my standard and the king's set over a town, I feel empty. The battle is over! Next one, next one.

Mighty King Charles VII, king of France, anointed by God and by Joan, was listening to the council of fat old men who cared about nothing more than their own comfort. Too slow! I couldn't stand it. So I left and took my men. I am the king's vassal, sure, but only if he wants to do something with me! If he's going to let me sit collecting dust while he frets about the dangers and precautions and limitations and treaties and details, then I'm going to leave. So I did. I left. I left and I took the men who were loyal to me. And there were a lot of them. Hundreds. Thousands. And we freed France for her ungrateful king and her absent God.

I suppose we should have exercised a little more care. Maybe it was rash to provoke the might of the English and Burgundian armies. Maybe I should have seen how much they hated me because I was doing what Charles didn't have the

guts too. But forgive me if I was too busy saving France, like God told me, to worry about what Godons thought of me.

It was during a skirmish with the Burgundian army over the town of Compiègne that I was taken. We were losing, it was bad, and my men started to retreat into the town. I of course kept fighting; retreat really isn't my thing. And then the townspeople started lowering the portcullis. So my men were urging me into the town before it was too late, and time was running out, and at the last second, the Burgundians surrounded the rear guard and pulled me off my horse.

Honor stated that I, as a prisoner-of-war, should be put up for ransom. It was the international law. But I was not. I should *not* have been sold to my enemies, the English. But I was. And I should never, under any conditions, have been sold to the church. But I was. The Burgundian who captured me sold me to the English ecclesiastical court. Unthinkable. Sacrilegious. Damnable.

They tossed me from castle to castle. Mostly because they couldn't hold me anywhere for long. I kept trying to escape. Once I slid between the bars of my cell, overpowered two armed sentries, locked them in their guardroom, and was walking out of the castle when I ran into the porter. Another time, I jumped from the tower where they were keeping me, seventy feet to solid earth. No kidding. Of course, I was a little too injured at the bottom to move, so maybe that plan wasn't too good.

Eventually they took me to the city of Rouen. North-westish of Paris: English territory. That was where they were going to put me on trial. They said I was a witch. That I had relations with demons. Did magic. They wanted to kill

me, because if they got me out of the way, they could destabilize Charles again. Take his crown away, say it meant nothing. They wanted to undermine me, to take away my popular support, to prove I was just an upstart woman.

The trials were...boring. They charged me with seventy-two articles, and they had to examine me on every one. Dressing like a man, that was their biggest one. It was a capital offense back then, and it was the only one I actually was guilty of. But it protected me from rape, which I thought was worse. They wouldn't stop asking why, even when I told them that. Every question was a trap, they were always looking for the least little slip, the least little pause or uncertainty. They interrogated me six times publicly and then nine times in secret. They showed me instruments of torture to try to get me to confess, I barely knew to what. I'm only a girl. I don't like pain very much. I was scared. And confused. I didn't know what they were asking half the time, those learned men with their black robes and deep voices and stern looks. They denied me my right to a defense council. They denied me my right to have French as well as Englishmen as my judges. And they kept me in an illegal secular prison. I was supposed to have female guards, but they...I am a pure girl. Chaste. Of God. And they...my guards...they were bad men. Who...they took advantage and molested me. I couldn't sleep, I was so afraid. And in the mornings they'd drag me out and put me on trial with a crowd of people calling to burn me...Burn me! I'm not...I never meant for this!

They told me they were going to kill me if I didn't sign an abjuration. I couldn't sign anything, I couldn't write. And I had no idea what abjuration

meant. Well, I found out. It means taking it back, recanting, saying you lied about everything.

The only time I lied was when I signed that paper. What could I do? They were going to kill me! Don't you dare think ill of me for that. They taught me how to sign my name. It is the only word I ever wrote in my whole life. I signed their paper.

But they had a problem. See, after I signed the paper saying I was sorry, they were supposed to let me go. But they couldn't do that. They had convicted me of dressing like a man, and I had consented to never do it again; I was free. But right after I signed that paper, they put me back in prison, and...they took my dress away. And left me with a pile of men's clothing in the corner. My choices were to stay naked in the cell with the guards, or put on the clothes. And I did. And that's how they got me.

During the Inquisition, the rules were like this: say you're sorry and you get off easy, or don't and die. But if you say you're sorry and then do it again, relapse...you don't get a second chance. You just die.

They built a very tall stake in the middle of the city. They used dry wood, to make sure I didn't suffocate before I could feel the flames. Mercy is not an English attribute.

My mind was oddly clear and calm. I felt afraid, but distantly, more like knowing someone you love is afraid than actually feeling it yourself. I prayed. Hard. And I asked if someone wouldn't hold a crucifix up in front of me, so that I could see him, the one I was suffering with and dying for. No one did. They

were afraid of the wrath of the English. The flames came up so fast! And then, right in front of me, I saw the crucifix! A peasant priest had taken pity on me. It felt like the wine and myrrh the good people offered Christ on the cross. It was the most moving gesture, the only comfort he could give me. I saw his face in the crowd. He looked young and afraid. He didn't want to be there, he didn't want to watch this. But he stayed. He stayed for me and braved the fire with me. And my heart was so moved by this last act of charity. It is hard to believe, after the horrors of war, the terror of imprisonment and rape, the crooked mockery of justice that had brought me to face the ultimate cruelty of man in the name of earthly power, but in this one small act, I remembered what I had fought for: the good people of France. And they are good. I could not have given my life for a worthier cause.

Jhesus, Jhesus, Jhesus...

People still haven't learned much, I don't think, from my life and death. People haven't learned that I didn't want to die; it was never my intention to be a superstar or a saint. I just wanted to do what God told me to do.

If someone like Ayat had known God, maybe she would have not done what she did. What did she do? Well...In March of 2002, only a few months before her wedding and journalism school...Ayat strapped a vest to herself, as per her orders, and entered an Israeli supermarket. Then she detonated the bomb, killing herself and two other people. One was an elderly security guard. One was a teenaged Israeli girl, only a few months apart from her in age, again the victim

of being born in the wrong place at the wrong time. The girl, Rachel Levy, looked so much like Ayat that their families could barely tell them apart at the morgue.

You see, it was senseless violence! That is an abomination in the sight of God! With me, God had a plan to get the English out, and it wasn't twenty five years after my death before the French had won the war and I was retried and cleared of all charges. That's right. What Ayat did was against God, she killed herself! She had a choice, and she chose...I didn't have a choice. I didn't choose to die. Well, I chose to fight, which led to my death, but I needed to! My home was being threatened! Ayat...

Silence. A realization.

She fought for her family. She fought for her home. That was where she saw her God. But she did it wrong! She shouldn't have killed innocent people. That's wrong. I didn't...I told you I didn't mean to. I did what I had to do. It was what I...fought so hard to be a part of. That violence.

But the voices! They were real! Weren't they? I heard them, they were from God, Ayat's call was from the Devil!

They say you should never question God. They told me to do things, and I did them. I killed and died in the name of my God. I didn't think it might have been anything...different. Anything less worthy. I gave up my life. That's the one thing God hates to see destroyed: life. I...destroyed. A lot of things, a lot of people.

No. No. That can't be right. I was sure. I was always so sure. And it hasn't changed. You only get one life, and mine was used for the right. Wasn't it? Of course it was.

You understand, you...do, you do...forgive me? Do you...don't you judge me! Judge not, lest you yourself be judged, for it shall come back to you on the Last Day! The Reckoning! I have never been afraid to stand before the Lord. I cannot waver now. His law and His word were sent for good. To do His people good. I was a part of that. I was an instrument of good, of...peace.

That is what they say, isn't it? All those holy books. The Bible. The Talmud. The Q'uran. Peace. Peace for the children of this earth. On earth...as it is in heaven.

Oh, what have we done?

Joan looks to God as the church bells peal their judgment.

Jeanne d'Arc Summary

Jeanne d'Arc is a one-woman show, written, produced, and performed by Megan Dobbertin. The original concept was to create a piece of theatre that delved into the motivations behind religious conflict. It is intended to provoke thought regarding the justification of holy wars. All major organized religions are based in a foundation of peace. How then are they so often distorted into violence?

In our modern, PC, secular world, not too many pieces of theatre discuss religion. Theatre people tend to dedicate themselves to a different kind of god, and do not spare much thought for going to church or temple. But the fact is that the majority of the world population practices some sort of faith. It is a topic that moves people deeply, sometimes unites, sometimes polarizes. But everyone has an opinion.

Therefore, a play about a subject so volatile a subject as religious warfare is bound to be uncomfortable, if not offensive, to the audience. A good deal of the task of writing this piece was toeing the line between too outspoken and too safe. A very opinionated play alienates its audience. Artistic integrity is sacrificed for shock value. Conversely, addressing this topic without a candid discussion of its most disturbing aspects would be a failure to incite the intended discussion. Furthermore, it would be a disservice to the victims of the wars discussed.

Having a strong, character-motivated narrative helps to dispel this potential for offense. Joan of Arc was the perfect candidate for the job. She is

widely recognized, having already achieved a highly symbolic status, and her story is wonderfully interesting. It reads like a novel; she rose from the depths of poverty and obscurity to achieve unimaginable victories, and her fall was just as sudden and drastic. In the course of a few years, she forever altered world history. Also, of course, there is the fact that her life is so pertinent to the topic at hand.

Joan was an illiterate farm girl, born a century into the Hundred Year's War (a misnomer, as it actually occurred over the span of nearly 125 years) (jeanne-darc.com). France had failed to achieve a major victory over the invading English forces in living memory. The general feeling was that once the city of Orleans fell, France would be finished. A dying nation, breathing its last, dispirited gasps.

When Joan was very young (ten to thirteen, according to various sources), she began to hear the voices of angels telling her that it was her destiny to lead the French army to victory. Around the age of sixteen, she ran away from home and clawed her way up the social ladder, eventually winning an audience with the Dauphin, Charles VII. A defeated leader, Charles willingly gave the girl his army. She marched straight to Orleans, some seven to nine months after the English had besieged the city. Within the span of nine bloody days, Joan raised the siege and restored Orleans to the French empire. In the words of Lucien Fabre, "In the space of nine days, a young girl of seventeen had brought about a complete reversal in the political and military situation, and reestablished the morale of the French army." (163)

This untrained teenager, who had never ridden a horse or handled a sword, led the army around the French countryside, recapturing every city or hamlet encountered, slaughtering thousands of English soldiers. At the battle of Patay, the French forces lost fewer than three hundred men. The English lost 2,500. (Fabre 204)

The immensity of her victories caused the French people to rally behind her, inspired by the belief of her divine commission. The English, too, were so astounded that they could not contribute it to anything other than supernatural help. However, they believed it was Satan, not God.

Joan enjoyed a year of nearly unmarred success. Though she failed to reclaim Paris, on the whole the French situation was no longer dire. It was hardly critical. The English were infuriated, and put a high price on Joan's head. She was taken prisoner during a skirmish in the town of Compeigne, and sold to the English as a prisoner of war.

To put into perspective the immensity of Joan's importance, consider this: peasants such as Joan were not allowed to achieve a rank higher than foot soldier (Joan should not have even been allowed this, as she was a woman). Foot soldiers, when taken prisoner, were sold at a standard price of eight gold livres. Higher ranks were sold for considerably more. Captains went for a few hundred; generals could expect a ransom of perhaps a few thousand. The highest price was 10,000 livres, and it was reserved for royalty alone by manner of the international

code of chivalry. Joan's price? The English bought her for a full 10,000 livres.
(Fabre)

She was held in a succession of prisons over the course of nearly a year before she was brought to Rouen and put on trial under the terms of the Inquisition for witchcraft. It is hard to find many verifiable facts about how the trials went, as her prosecutors appear to have disregarded much of the law concerning such cases, but the extent to which Joan was abused will never be known, as every source says something different according to their biases. However, it appears to be a verifiable fact that Joan was denied many rights of the accused, and held in an illegal prison where she was repeatedly molested by her guards.

Eventually, she was coerced into signing an abjuration, a document stating that she recanted her statements that her voices were from God, and admitting to witchcraft. Shortly afterwards, and under very mysterious circumstances, she was convicted of relapse. Two days later, she was burnt alive, her ashes tossed into the Seine to prevent any relic seekers. (jeanne-darc.com)

Since her death, Joan has consistently reappeared symbolically in times of warfare: the French revolution (which, ironically, destroyed some of the only relics of her life), the World Wars. 18th century neoclassicism and romanticism and 20th century art nouveau treated her kindly, while her canonization in the Roman Catholic Church occurred in 1920. She now enjoys the status of the patron saint of France. In the modern era of conscientious objection, her particular brand of aggression has lost its flair, and though a feature film and a

miniseries about her life both debuted in 1999, since September 11 she seems to have disappeared from the pop culture radar (aside from the pacifistic *Joan of Arcadia*).

But she still holds her relevance in another way. Long a favorite of young girls, she has lost her popularity in the last decade because of her fundamentalist stance. Yet she now becomes a parallel to the Eastern world (a world she once dreamed of conquering; some of her letters make reference to her desire to lead a crusade to Jerusalem after she finished saving France). In particular, the religious zeal of Ayat al-Akhras is startlingly similar.

As a seventeen-year-old who grew up in a Palestinian refugee camp outside of Bethlehem, Ayat, like Joan, inherited a war that trailed back through the centuries. Her life, too, was shaped by violence and fear. Following the deaths of her three militant cousins, and the accidental slaying of her neighbor by the Israeli army, which she witnessed, she joined the radical group al-Aqsa. She was trained to be a suicide bomber. (*60 Minutes II*)

Her mission took place in an Israeli supermarket. The security guard stopped her at the door, so she detonated her vest there, killing him, herself, and a seventeen-year-old Israeli named Rachel Levy. The two girls so resembled each other that their remains were nearly indistinguishable. (*Newsweek*)

The intention of this play is neither to condemn nor to extol the lives and actions of Joan and Ayat. It seems that, while many people think her crazy, Joan still receives a lot of praise, whereas Ayat is universally condemned (at least in this hemisphere). But why? Ayat killed two people. While it is historically

impossible to say how many Joan killed (many sources say she was just a leader, and not a fighter, so she may never have killed a man herself), it is still a fact that she ordered the deaths of a great many people, not just by leading the charge. After a century of war, with the treasuries of both adversaries depleted, neither side could afford to either ransom their own or feed enemy prisoners. Therefore, it was common practice for the victorious army in a battle to merely slaughter any low-ranking prisoners. Under Joan's direct orders, tens of thousands of Englishmen were executed.

It is said that she felt bad about it. Is that justification? The English did the same to the French. Does that make it ok? Why do we still think of her as more worthy of praise than Ayat, whose body count pales in comparison? Why is it fine to love Joan and completely taboo to even discuss whether or not Ayat's actions were justifiable?

If there is one thing that this project hopes to accomplish, it is to incite thought. That is why it juxtaposes these two seemingly different stories. That is why uses the theatrical convention of direct address, even asking questions of the audience. It is a challenge to consider their choices and the motivations behind them. It does not ask that you love either of these girls, or think they were right, or even understand them. All it asks is that you try.