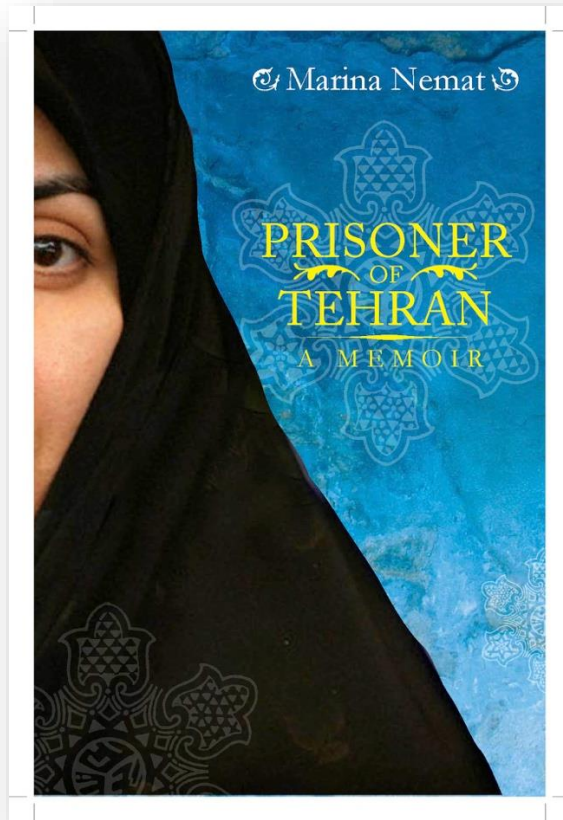


PRISONER OF TEHRAN

PRESENTED BY
MOTUS O DANCE THEATRE



A TEACHERS STUDY GUIDE

www.motuso.com

Overview of Curriculum Connections

The following major curriculum themes can be extended by watching the show, participating in discussions and carrying out some of the activities in this Guide.

- Dance & Drama – understanding cultures; reflecting, analysing, responding
- Civics – how individuals and groups can participate in action that promotes change
- Social Sciences & Humanities - equity, diversity, social justice

About Marina Nemat

Marina Nemat was born in 1965 in Tehran, Iran. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, she was arrested at the age of sixteen and spent more than two years in Evin, a political prison in Tehran, where she was tortured and came very close to execution. She came to Canada in 1991 and has called it home ever since. Her memoir of her life in Iran, *Prisoner of Tehran*, was published in Canada by Penguin Canada in 2007, has been published in 28 other countries, and has been an international bestseller. In 2007, Marina received the inaugural Human Dignity Award from the European Parliament, and in 2008, she received the prestigious Grinzane Prize in Italy. In 2008/2009, she was an Aurea Fellow at University of Toronto's Massey College, where she wrote her second book, *After Tehran: A Life Reclaimed*, which was published by Penguin Canada in 2010. Marina regularly speaks at high schools, universities, and conferences around the world and sits on the Board of Directors at CCVT (Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture) and on advisory boards at ACAT (Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture) and PEN Canada.

About MOTUS O dance theatre

It is strange to think how a gymnast, a sheep shearer and a figure skater could have their paths meet and eventually become Co-Artistic Directors of a dance theatre company in Canada. Yet, as it turns out, that diversity has become the essence of MOTUS O. Where backgrounds and talents collide and then reform, creating a dynamic team that explores the dramatic and relishes the physical – and all with a touch of humour.

The Artistic Directors of MOTUS O, James Croker, Cynthia Croker and Jack Langenhuizen, have been trained in several artistic disciplines with decades of combined performing experience in both street theatre and stage. This diversity, coupled with their collaborative style of creating, enriches the production values and constantly surprises the viewer. Each production displays their unique ability to be involved in the whole creative process. They create the story, design and build costumes and props, choreograph, shoot and edit film and if that is not enough, they perform.

MOTUS O is Latin for “the method of movement”. In the Artistic Directors words ‘we want to know the meaning of every movement and to move as if it has meaning’. Physical inventiveness, lightning action, grace and raw energy are all trademarks of their evolving style.

Since their formation in 1990, MOTUS O has created numerous full-length productions for both family and adult audiences. The troupe continues to tour throughout North America, Europe and the South Seas, bringing with them their innovative and highly visual works to both small and large communities alike.

PRISONER OF TEHRAN – THE STAGE SHOW

Jack Langenhuizen, Cynthia and James Croker, the artistic directors of MOTUS O, first met Marina Nemat at a conference about the Arts in Education where they were both presenting. Jack, Cynthia and James were so deeply taken with Marina’s story that they contacted her with the idea of presenting her story in movement. Their thought was not to dance her story, but to use movement to illustrate her story telling. After a number of meetings, the work began to take form. The issue of how to support Marina’s story through movement and not ‘hijack’ it, was crucial. Together they decided that Marina would be a ‘performer’ in the piece whenever possible. That the story-teller would not be relegated to the background, to a voice over. It was important not only to hear Marina tell the story, but to see her tell it, as we watched MOTUS O dance it. The result – a new place in storytelling combining spoken word, movement, video and music.

TESTIMONIALS

MOTUS O Dance Theatre presented “Prisoner of Tehran” to the staff and students of Atikokan High School and Fort Frances High School in the Rainy River District School Board. Students were engaged and connected to the dance, choreography, and story. The topic was current, reflected global issues, and had Canadian connections. Extensions to the classroom included opportunities for social justice inquiry, critical thinking, and artistic interpretation. MOTUS O Dance Theatre’s Prisoner of Tehran is powerful, artistic, and entertaining.

*Andrew Harris
Superintendent of Education
Rainy River District School Board*

I want to thank you for bringing Marina’s story to White Pines School in Sault Ste-Marie, Ontario. Both our students and staff appreciated the numerous messages throughout the dramatization such as hope, awareness, the power of asking questions and the concept of good versus evil, victim versus torturer. An amazing learning opportunity.

*Joey Turco
Principal
White Pines Collegiate & Vocational School, Sault Ste-Marie Ontario*

Eye opening, inspirational and I couldn't keep my eyes off Nemat's brave performance.

Student

Bur Oak Secondary School, Markham, Ontario Canada

Prisoner of Tehran is a spectacular piece – perfect in length, message and delivery. There is enough historical context given in the opening video montage to set the scene after which Nemat's own voice takes over. The dance is by turns athletic and nuanced as the four artists wind around Nemat's words and her physical body. The narration, the movement, and the spaces between the two create a powerfully emotional experience for the audience. The piece is simply spectacular.

Kate Kostandoff

Head of Library

Bur Oak Secondary School, Markham Ontario Canada

Watching *Prisoner of Tehran* made me look at the world through a different lens. Marina's strength, courage and wisdom is incredible and inspirational. Her story needs to be told to many generations to come.

Student

Unionville High School, Unionville, Ontario Canada

I will remember this day and this show for the rest of my life. I will never forget it. It will always be with me.

Grade 12 student

Kirkland Lake District Composite School

PRISONER OF TEHRAN – THE BOOK

“Prisoner of Tehran” is the personal memoir of Marina Nemat, a Russian-Iranian woman, who was detained in the notorious Evin Prison of Tehran during the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The book provides a glimpse of what life was like prior to the revolution and also portrays the shocking turn of events, which lead to the death of many innocent people.

Marina’s childhood experiences and photographs (included in the book) are beautiful and surprising for a Western reader who may not know that up until the 1970’s women could wear shorts and openly date boys in Iran. A high degree of freedom existed for all of society. They could read Western books, listen to Western music, and practice different religions.

The darker aspect of the pre-1979 Iran is the high level of corruption and concurrent economic challenges, which stirred revolutionary sentiments in the country. The Shah, or monarch of Iran, at the time was Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. He courted and in turn received Western support in raising oil prices and purchasing arms. One famous symbol of the regime’s wastefulness and moral depravity is the lavish celebration of the 2500th anniversary of the Persian Empire, which took place near the ancient city of Persepolis and cost close to \$200 million. The Shah’s megalomaniac tendencies fueled support for the impending Islamic revolution, which sought to re-establish the more conservative Shia Islamic values. The Shah’s regime attempted to arrest the revolutionary perpetrators but was unable to turn the tide. Once the Islamic Revolution, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, had swept the country, new strict rules were introduced which required women to cover, excluded them from public service, and attempted to segregate all of society and limit open male-female interactions.

PROJECT POSSIBILITIES:

1. Can one person make a difference? In this show and book, the answer is both yes and no. Explore Marina Nemat’s experience of individual people making a difference and those same people (or others) being *unable* to make a difference. What factors seem to determine a person’s ability to create change? Ultimately, how far does she decide one person’s power can reach?
2. By the end of the book, Marina Nemat has discovered a few things she knows for sure. “I had to find some goodness in this pain or it was going to drown me” (214) “God gives life and He is the only one who can take it away” (237) “Life is precious, don’t let go, live again”(241) “Violence is pointless” (245-246) “If the world had paid attention earlier...many innocent lives would have been saved. But the world had remained silent, partly because witnesses like me had been afraid to speak up” (301).

3. Explore her path toward discovering any one of those beliefs. What ideas, experiences, or events in the book led her to that lesson? Then consider this question: Each of these ideas seems universally accepted. If so, why are they also so frequently violated?
4. Although this book is Marina Nemat's personal story, her experience should be important to anyone who cares about human rights, particularly freedom from torture and degrading treatment; freedom of opinion and the right to peaceful assembly and association. If you were asked to speak to a student group about the average citizen's responsibility to protect these rights, which aspects of Marina's story might you use to support your position? (Note: You'll have to decide what your position is. What do you personally believe is the average person's responsibility in this area?)
5. It is difficult to understand why Marina Nemat is kept in prison for so long or what outcome the government expects from her imprisonment. What seems to be the purpose of Evin prison—punishment, rehabilitation, or something else? What *should* be the purpose of prisons?
6. Many stories of people who survived trauma exhibit that person's amazing resilience and ability to overcome the after-effects of traumatic experiences. But not all survivor stories end this way and clearly not all survivors would say their stories have happy endings. Which message would you say Marina Nemat has chosen?
7. How does Nemat's story respond to the question of how one person can make a difference? What does her experience say about the possibilities and limitations of individual action?
8. What is the relationship between human suffering and individual development? Use specific examples from Prisoner of Tehran to develop your response.
9. Should we consider Nemat's story a call to action or a story of individual healing? Explain your response using specific examples from her memoir.
10. What individual strengths are evident in Marina's early life that become essential tools for her later survival? Discuss Marina's individual development over the course of the novel: where does she begin and where does she end?

A Paper Assignment and a few activities/assignments to build on this.

Personal: Consider the act of writing in your own life. What has it meant or accomplished? Where and how is writing presented in Nemat's memoir? OR write a "memoir" – making "the private" public. . .

Experiential: Visit and volunteer at Canadian Centre for the Victims of Torture (or another organization that helps marginalized people) and reflect on your experience and how it connects to Nemat's book.

Research: What aspect of Nemat's story are you still wanting to understand more fully? Select an area to do more contextual research to support a deeper grasp of the issues and events that surround Nemat's experience.

Character Analysis from book "Prisoner of Tehran" - Chapters 1-7

Marina

Marina is the main character in this book, as it is a memoir of her life. She is a very smart, intriguing, intelligent, well informed, brave woman. She is extremely mature. She is Christian, and was arrested January 15th, 1982. She was accused for plotting against the government when she spoke out in Math class and asked her teacher to teach her Calculus instead of talking about Politics. Marina's mother tells her she should think before she speaks because she tells the truth. She also was different to most girls in Evin who were Muslim. "Most Muslim girls from traditional families – are quiet, shy and submissive – but I didn't have any of these qualities." Marina is a very charismatic woman, and very easy to like.

Marina's Mother

Marina's mother has her own hair dressing salon under the apartment, Marina's mother is sometimes harsh toward Marina and used to lock her on Marina's balcony for hours to enforce solitude on her. "My mother's body was shaking and her face had turned white. She had covered her mouth with her hand, as if to muffle a never-ending cry." This is how she felt when Marina was taken by the revolutionary guards. Her mother is a funny character, she sleeps in until 9am, and is always grumpy with Marina, though she buys Marina books every month. She obviously loves Marina but is strict.

Marina's Grandma /Fathers Mother

Marina's Grandma is a stereotypical Russian bahboo. Marina's Grandma is stubborn in the sense she knows how to speak Persian, though she will only speak Russian to people. Marina's Grandma moved to Iran at the start of Russia's communism. Marina and her grandma often went to the park and to the only Russian Orthodox Church which was a 2 hour walk away. On the way she would buy Marina treats, although she claimed she didn't believe in presents. When Marina was 7, her grandma died, though she left Marina a box of all her treasures.

Marina's Father

Owned a dance studio, though after his mother's death he closed down his dance studio and found a job at a division of the Ministry of Arts and Culture, working with folklore dance groups. He got to travel to different countries with this job with the men and women dancers who represented Iran at different national events.

Ali

Was like Marina's dark guardian angel. He was a revolutionary guard, who took an interest in Marina while interrogating her to find more information about plots against the government. They discussed the Koran, Communism, and Christianity. He was felt amused by this intriguing conversation with a young girl. He then became her saviour in disguise when he saved her from execution via firing squad. Ali had gone to Ayatollah Khomeini (dictator), who was a close friend of Ali's Father. He got Marina's sentence reduced from death to life in prison. She didn't want Ayatollah to save her, she wanted to die at this point in time.

Albert

Albert is an Armenian second hand book keeper. For three years Albert's bookstore was the highlight of Marina's Junior High life. Albert allowed Marina to borrow books written in English to bring back after she had read them. Albert had a wife and a son. His son had moved to America with his wife and 2 boys. Just after Marina's 12th birthday, Albert told Marina that he was moving to America to be with his son and grandchildren as Albert's wife of 51 years was dying and that was her last wish.

Sarah and Sirus

Sarah had been Marina's best friend since the first grade. She has large, dark-brown eyes, thick curly black hair that fell on her shoulders. Sarah had a brother 3 years older named Sirus, who was a part of Mojaedin-e Khalgh, a leftist Muslim organization, that was revolting against Ayatollah Khomeini who was the dictator at the time. Unlike the rest of Sarah's family, Sirus was very shy. Sarah and Sirus were arrested on the 2nd of January, 1982. Sarah was 16 and Sirus was 19. Over the past months since the Islamic Revolution hundreds of people were arrested accused of opposing the government.

Sarah and Marina re-united in Evin Political Prison after Marina was moved to the 246 women's ward. There Sarah informed Marina that Gita was executed and she had heard no news from her brother so she assumed he was executed as well.

Sarah's father was an engineer and a big man who always told funny jokes, laughed loudly and recited beautiful old poems. Sarah's mother worked at a bank and always wore elegant suits and very high heeled shiny black shoes. She was a small, round women with short, black hair, who always hugged Marina whenever she came over. Marina wished she lived in a house like Sarah's. It was on a street without cars, stores, vendors and beggars, it was quiet. Sarah's house was always coloured with noise and laughter.

Gita

Gita and Marina have been friends since she was 13. Gita and Marina met in cottage country, 5 hours north of Tehran. Gita was a few years older than Marina, but went to the same school. Gita was arrested in December and also went to Evin though she was executed early for not cooperating with authorities.

Arash

Arash was Marina's second love and first kiss; they also met in cottage country, at Gita's birthday party. He has a brother Aram who was 16, 3 years older than Marina and Arash was 18, 5 years older than Marina. Arash was at first year university to become a doctor. Marina and Arash were in love despite the age difference, they shared their first kiss though he regretted it as it was against his religion and they could only kiss after they got married as it was considered disrespectful. Arash had dark eyes, slightly raised cheekbones, and somehow a childlike mouth which contrasted with his strong featured face. He was about 2 inches taller than Marina with short brown hair. They spent the summer together going for walks and bike rides on the beach, reading poetry sitting on the swing set in his back yard. Everyday Arash would play the flute for Marina; when Arash played the flute he said he felt closer to God. Arash was a practising Muslim, he was part of the revolution and agreed with communism. He joined in the protests and revolts against the Shah. Arash believe that the Shah, his family and the government were all corrupt. They had been becoming wealthier by the day while most of the Iranian people had been struggling against poverty.

At the end of summer Arash left 2 weeks before Marina to go back to Tehran, though they were going to meet up again in Tehran. There was a protest against the Shah 2 days before Marina got back to Tehran. The Shah's soldiers opened fire and it was assumed that Arash died.

Irena Arash's Grandma

Irena, Arash's grandma was also a refugee from Russia. She took a great liking to Marina as Arash introduced them to each other and she spoke Russian to her. Irena reminded Marina of her own Grandma. She was a handsome old woman with silver-grey hair and she fussed around the kitchen the same way her grandma did. For the summer Arash and his brother Aram stayed at the cottage with Irena. Irena always invited Marina to come for lunch with them.

READING GROUP GUIDE

Discussion Questions:

- a. Marina's experiences were truly extraordinary. Did this make it difficult for you to relate to her? In what aspects of her life and personality did you connect most with Marina? At what points did you have the most difficult time connecting with her? What surprised you most about Marina?

- b. On page 46, after Marina has been locked outside on the balcony as a punishment by her mother, she decides to rebel, saying "I knew that my mother would get angry, but I didn't care; I couldn't bear my solitary confinement any longer." How do you think childhood experiences such as this one affected Marina's reaction to prison? Was she more or less equipped to deal with the conditions and restrictions imposed at Evin as a result of how her mother treated her?

- c. On page 85, after Marina discovers that Arash is involved in revolutionary activities, she says, "I tried to believe him. I tried to be brave. After all, I was thirteen years old." How did Marina's age throughout the memoir influence your reading? Is present day Marina successful in conveying the feelings and thoughts of the young Marina? Do you find her voice believable as a teenager?

- d. When Ali saves Marina just seconds before her execution she remembers: "His eyes focused on mine, Ali walked toward me. I wanted to run. I wanted Hamehd to shoot me and end my life" (42). Why do you think it was worse for Marina to be rescued by Ali than to die by execution? Does Marina's reaction reflect more broadly on the role of women in Iranian culture?

- e. Marina's feelings for Ali are complex and wrenching. On page 231, Ali says, "I wanted you, but I'm not that selfish. If there was a way, I would have let you go, and then I would have probably killed myself with a clean shot in the head." Do you believe him, or do you think his actions were motivated solely by his desire? Ali's mother tells Marina that he is "a good man". Do Marina's feelings for Ali's family change her opinion of him?

- f. The memoir begins with Marina landing in Canada with her husband and child; we know from the outset, therefore, that her marriage to Ali has ended and that she has remarried. How did this knowledge affect your view of Marina and Ali's relationship? If Marina's marriage to Ali had truly been a "life sentence," would you view it differently?

- g. The imagery of the "washable" nature of the written word occurs throughout the book, such as when Marina sees Sarah's body covered in tiny words: "And she washed the words off her skin. The Book of Sarah. Alive, breathing, feeling, hurting, remembering" (page 119). Later, when Marina returns from Evin, she learns that her mother has destroyed her books and her grandmother's life story: "Washed books. The written word drowned, silenced" (page 259). Why is it significant that washing words destroys rather than cleanses them? How does this imagery of "washed words" apply to Marina's story?
- h. On page 237, Marina and Ali have an argument about the execution of political prisoners. Ali supports the idea of self-defense, while Marina responds, "I will not kill another human being." With whom do you agree? Why do you think that Marina's and Ali's parallel experiences as political prisoners resulted in opposite viewpoints? Do you think that gender plays a role in their reactions?
- i. When Marina and Andre decide to illegally marry, he says to her, "I know that marrying you is dangerous. But I want to do it. We can't give in. We're not doing anything wrong" (page 264). Do you think their decision to marry illegally is brave or foolish? Is it significant that these words come from Andre, who had not been imprisoned, rather than Marina?
- j. When Marina returns after two years in Evin, she "felt like a stranger" at home; she wonders if the lack of questions about her experience is "their way of protecting me or protecting themselves." This conversation echoes the one between Marina and her husband at the beginning of the memoir, when he apologizes for "not asking" about her experience. Are Marina's parents and Andre protecting her, themselves, or both? Do you think Marina would still have shared her story with the world if she had originally been able to speak about it with those closest to her? Why?

Resources for *Prisoner of Tehran*

PRISONER OF TEHRAN - PROMO VIDEO

<https://vimeo.com/109770286>

Center for Victims of Torture (a local organization dedicated to helping survivors of torture heal and build healthy lives and communities, provides direct services to survivors, also trains community members, clinicians, volunteers and educators) <http://www.cvt.org/>

Women’s Prison Book Project (a local organization that provides reading materials to women prisoners and that is dedicated to educating the public about the condition of prisoners)
<http://www.wpbp.org/>

Meet Marina

<http://www.simonandschuster.com/multimedia?video=27801013001>
http://www.quillandquire.com/authors/profile.cfm?article_id=7777

Scott Simon’s NPR interview with Marina Nemat: In this interview Nemat discusses reaching the point (20 years after her imprisonment) of being able to tell her story, the central role of memory and stories in her survival, the combination of good and evil in humans, her ability to see the humanity of her torturer, and the Stockholm syndrome.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=9984934>

Islamic Revolution

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7856172.stm> <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4326522?seq=5>

Iranian History

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/country_profiles/806268.stm
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/indepth_coverage/middle_east/iran/timeline.html
<http://www.iranchamber.com/index.php>

Political Prisoners/Evin Prison

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/5077180.stm>

NPR Fresh Air interview with Marjane Satrapi (author of *Persepolis*) – *Persepolis* is a memoir in the form of a graphic novel about growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. Satrapi’s voice and experience provide a rich companion/comparison with Nemat’s. In this interview she talks about fear, speaking out, rebelling as a teenager, the value of education, pop culture, leaving her home country, and human beings’ relationship to repression and what is forbidden. She specifically mentions the directors of schools giving lists of student names to the Guardians of the Revolution, and the potential for imprisonment and execution. This is one of the reasons that Satrapi’s parents send her to Austria when she is 14.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1283520>

Maps: <http://www.maplandia.com/iran/tehran/tehran/>