

PERFORMANCE WORLD PREMIERE

STATE OF FAITH

INNA SHEVCHENKO



FREE
REPUBLIC OF
VIENNA
FESTIVAL

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Elisabethkirche zur
Frohen Botschaft

'Faith began as a promise. But it became a border drawn across the human mind', says Ukrainian activist and FEMEN icon Inna Shevchenko. She opens this year's Republic of Gods with a performative speech that centres on the female body. For centuries, every major religion has regulated female desire, sanctified women's obedience and criminalised their freedom. Demanding that the alliance between religion and power be broken, Shevchenko now proposes a new liturgical form with her *State of Faith*. As spoken monologues and sung appeals blend into a contemporary ritual, *State of Faith* is the bid for a reinvention of faith, reclaiming sanctity as a source of resistance. 'If faith is to survive, it must stop kneeling before power and rise with those who refuse to kneel at all.'

Language
English



barrier-free access

SCREENING & TALK

As part of the *Thank Goddess!* film series, Stadtkino Wien will be showing *Girls & Gods* on 24 May at 7.30pm, followed by a discussion with Inna Shevchenko.

By and with Inna Shevchenko **Vocal solo** Alik Siousti, Alexandra Achillea **Vocals** Adél Csima, Lora Krasteva, Sarah-Maria Pilwax, Leonora Scheib **Composition and Musical Direction** Iason Marmaras

Production Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Free Republic of Vienna

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INTERVIEW WITH INNA SHEVCHENKO

In the 8th century, there was a woman named Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya. She walked through the streets of Basra in present-day Iraq, carrying a torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. When asked what this meant, she said: “I want to burn down your paradise and flood your hell. So that you stop praying out of fear or hope.” Some consider her a feminist icon and there are also theologians who describe themselves as feminist. But to what extent can the doctrine of monotheistic religions be that?

INNA SHEVCHENKO: Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya walking through the streets of with a torch and a bucket of water is one of the most revolutionary images in the history of religion precisely because it is an image of refusal. Not reform. Not reinterpretation. Refusal. She is not arguing with the institution on its own terms. She is rendering its entire logic: reward, punishment, transaction are irrelevant. What remains when you remove fear and hope is something no clergy can govern, no doctrine can contain.

This is why I find the project of feminist theology, however sincere, ultimately insufficient and I want to be precise about why, because the insufficiency is interesting.

Yes, there are passages in the monotheistic canons that can be read as radical. As liberating. Some of these texts are, if you approach them as literature, genuinely beautiful philosophically alive, poetically extraordinary. I have no desire to pretend otherwise. But the feminist theologian's method requires a sleight of hand: to illuminate certain passages, you must cast others into shadow. And those others, the ones about women's testimony being worth half a man's, about wives being fields to be plowed at will, about female silence as divine order are not ambiguous. They do not yield to generous interpretation. They mean what they say.

So the move is always: selective reading presented as the true reading. Which is intellectually dishonest, however well-intentioned.

But here is what I find more revealing than the dishonesty itself: the very desire to find feminism inside these texts is a symptom of how deep religion's authority runs even in its critics. It means accepting that legitimacy must be sought within the canon. That liberation requires the text's permission. That we must find ourselves in the word of God before we can stand up straight.

Rabia didn't do that. She didn't search the Quran for the passage that justified her. She walked out into the night with a torch and made her argument in the street, in her body, in an image so precise that we are still talking about it 13 centuries later.

That is the actual radical move: not to modernise the doctrine, but to stop needing its approval. Not to find the feminist verse, but to step entirely outside the framework that requires you to find one.

Read as literature, these texts can sometimes be magnificent. Read as the word of God which is their claim, and the only basis on which they hold power over living people they cannot take us where we need to go.

You were born in Kherson shortly after the collapse of the USSR and grew up in a post-Soviet society. There is a common stereotype that religion played no role and that women had more rights.

IS: The stereotype is half-true, and half-true is often more dangerous than a lie. Yes, Soviet ideology was officially atheist. Yes, churches were closed, some priests arrested, religiosity treated as backwardness. But what this narrative misses is that in Ukraine, religion was never only about God. It was about something the Soviet state found far more threatening: a distinct identity of Ukrainians that refused to dissolve, where under Soviet regime, religion because a space of identity preservation. My two grandmothers are, for me, the perfect embodiment of this contradiction. One was a forced migrant, relocated from western Ukraine to the south, to Kherson, where Russification was not a policy but an atmosphere, something in the air you breathed. She was deeply religious. Her faith was the thread she held onto to her language, her songs, her sense of being from somewhere that existed and mattered. The other grandmother was a Soviet schoolteacher. Militantly, almost aggressively atheist. Religion for her was precisely the enemy obscurantism, submission, the opium Marx had diagnosed.

Two women. Opposite positions. And in both cases completely, entirely political. Neither of them would have used that word. But that is what it was. God was a political argument.

As it often is.

BIOGRAPHY

Inna Shevchenko (*1990) is a Ukrainian activist and one of the leading figures in the FEMEN protest movement, in which she has been active since 2009.

She gained international attention as a feminist pioneer in 2012 by cutting down a wooden cross in Kyiv in solidarity with the Russian band *Pussy Riot* and staging topless protests against patriarchal violence and religious oppression, such as in a live interview with the TV channel Al Jazeera. Due to political persecution, she has been living in France since 2013, where she founded FEMEN France and continues her activist work.

In the Austrian-Swiss documentary film *Girls & Gods* by Arash T. Riahi and Verena Soltiz, Inna Shevchenko explores the relationship between feminism and faith, as well as the institution of the church as an instrument of power. The film also fascinated cinema audiences in Austria.

PUBLICATION DETAILS

Owner, Editor and Publisher Wiener Festwochen GesmbH, Lehnárgasse 11/1/6, 1060 Wien, T + 43 1 589 22 0, festwochen@festwochen.at | www.festwochen.at **General Management** Milo Rau, Artemis Vakianis **Artistic Direction** (responsible for the content) Milo Rau, Artistic Direction **Picture Credits Cover** © Matt Observe/VGN **Produced by** Print Alliance HAV Produktions GmbH (Bad Vöslau) **Design** SIRENE Studio **Layout** Valerie Eccli

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