

For Etel, some first impressions

Lynne Tillman

Ammiel Alcalay telephoned me in the mid-1980s, and said, “You must hear Etel Adnan. She’s reading at the Graduate Center tonight.” Ammiel had never phoned and said anything like that. When friends feel that passionate, I try to obey their wishes.

There she sat, behind a long, wood table, as if talking to a seminar group, when actually she spoke to a large crowd in a big room crammed with chairs. Etel Adnan read poems, spoke about them, and all the while she grew in dimension, stature, sometimes a Buddha, sometimes a Gertrude Stein.

Her voice. Her words. Her composure. Her face. Grave, amused, sad, impassioned.

I sat in the back, having arrived not late but too late for a front seat. Musician Marc Ribot sat near me. Ammiel had called him too.

After Etel finished reading, I remember a sort of ecstasy. It’s a feeling I had when I was a teenager when hearing WH Auden read -- it was joy at his wisdom and fearlessness. Entrancement at his language. I remember hoping to be as strong as he when I was old, though probably not as weathered.

I’m musing, comparing Auden’s great World War II poem, “September 1, 1939,” with Etel Adnan’s “Arab Apocalypse.” Also, her *Sitt Marie Rose*. I’m drawing an impressionistic double portrait. Poets of war and love.

Etel Adnan: loving, powerful, defiantly vital, compassionate. A witness to, and participant in, so much of the 20th century and now 21st who maintains her surprise. Surprise is a writer’s best friend, I think that more and more. If one loses that capacity, one loses hope too. Etel Adnan has lost nothing, and age only enhances that youngster who once ran on the sidewalks of Beirut, when she should have walked like a proper girl. She always ran, she once told me. Etel still walks fast, thrusting her chin forward, a cheeky seer, as if walking in front of herself.

After that long-ago reading, I went forward and made her acquaintance. Edward Said and his wife also paid her court. I was experiencing remarkable events, I thought, watching these old friends, hearing this brilliant human being speak her work.

I determined to read her and hear her read again. Even to see her, and I hoped to become her friend. She’s a gracious friend to many of us, and to those who don’t know her a true friend through her writing. Aren’t we fortunate, to paraphrase Ludwig Wittgenstein, to live in this lousy world along with Etel Adnan.