

Five Arab American Plays Everyone Should Read
By Roaa Ali



Mosque Alert by Jamil Khoury

Arab American drama has been a growing movement, urgently demanding to center Arab American representation and carving a unique space of its own in the American theatre institution. As a genre, Arab American drama often deals with negotiations of identity, ethnic, racial and religious Othering, and explores the gender and sexual discourses of its community. It is also situated at the intersection of family and community codes, politics, cultures of resistance, and the American theatre establishment. Within that establishment, Arab American drama contests the demarcation of who traditionally occupies the cultural center and who is kept at the margin.

Despite not receiving the attention it deserves, Arab American drama and theatre existed long before 9/11, but it was arguably only then that it was afforded any demand or visibility, while

simultaneously being pigeonholed as an expression of a minority-in-crisis. Amidst heightened xenophobic rhetoric and the resurgence of anti-Arab and Muslim sentiments that colored the Trump years—and which is often reactivated during Israeli aggressions on Palestinian territories and people--Arab American drama continues to offer alternative narratives that are both invigorating and transformative. Growing out of an existing, albeit small, Arab-American theatrical repertoire, which dates back to 1909, the expanding post 9/11 Arab American theatre has continued to disrupt a state of political and cultural marginalization, occupying the unique space where the political is unequivocally personal and the personal is inevitably political. It is an impossible task to pinpoint or confine a number of plays as representative of the genre, but I want to introduce here five Arab American plays that made a transformative impact on my understanding of theatre in general, and Arab American theatre specially.

Yussef El Guindi's *Back of the Throat*

Of the many eloquent and innovative playwrights that Arab American drama boasts of, Yussef El Guindi is perhaps the genre's most critically acclaimed with his thrilling skill of organically evoking the political as he dramatizes the personal. El Guindi's *Back of the Throat* (2005) offers a deep and uncomfortable confrontation with paranoia and anti-Arab sentiments, that ensued after 9/11 as a state of affairs particularly for male Arab Americans. The play provides a parallel narrative exploring themes of surveillance, racial profiling, and the erosion of civil liberties in post-9/11 America. Originally stage-read in Chicago's Silk Road Rising, the play garnered multiple accolades, including winning the 2004 Northwest Playwrights' Competition, L.A. Weekly's Excellence in Playwriting Award for 2006, a nomination for the 2006 American Theater Critics Association's Steinberg/New Play Award, and being voted Best New Play of 2005 by the *Seattle Times*.

The play shows examples of the institutional bias practiced in the US following 9/11, as well as giving the space for the narrative of a suspicious America after a tragedy. The play portrays Khaled, the Arab American male who emerged after 9/11 as an immediate suspect of a crime he did not commit in a gripping Kafkaesque atmosphere of paranoia and intrigue.

Betty Shamieh's *The Black Eyed*

Describing her plays, Shamieh asserts: “they’re not about politics, but they’re inherently political. Because if you’ve never heard a perspective, it makes it political” (cited in Schillinger, 2004). At the beginning of her career, Shamieh wanted to escape a categorization that would pronounce her an Other, thrust in a marginalized artistic space. She was conscious that: “white, male writers are known as writers, while women and minorities [can] become very quickly pigeonholed; and theatres often times will accept certain types of plays from people with a certain ethnic identity” (Shamieh quoted in Alexander, 2005). However, 9/11 forced a spotlight on the Arabness of the Arab American in Shamieh.

In *The Black Eyed* (2009), four Palestinian women from different historical periods find themselves in a hazy afterlife, discussing their life’s trials, choices, and decisions and celebrating their life experiences. As characters, Delilah, Tamam, the Architect, and Aiesha, symbolize different facets of womanhood, collectively representing a shared consciousness of womanhood while occasionally expressing individual trials and experiences. The play does not provide definitive answers to their questions but offers them a space to voice their experiences, struggles, and unyielding strengths. *The Black Eyed* had its world premiere at the Magic Theatre in May 2005, its European premiere in Athens at Fournos Theatre in 2006, and its American premiere in the Off-Broadway New York Theatre Workshop in 2007.

There exists a well-documented history of external editorial pressures or self-imposed censorship imposed on productions depicting the Palestinian experience. This was evident in

the development of *The Black Eyed* where Betty Shamieh's initial script faced various forms of censorship. Initially, Shamieh's submission advocating for non-violence and depicting the suffering of a sister of a suicide bomber was rejected by organizers of the Brave New World Festival in November 2001. To ensure Arab American representation at the festival, Shamieh compromised and created a new monologue featuring an Arab American woman on a hijacked plane. This monologue later evolved into the character Architect in *The Black Eyed*, although the story and monologues underwent significant changes.

Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire*

Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* (2006) is a play that unapologetically centers Iraqi women characters on the American stage. *9 Parts of Desire* weaves a narrative tapestry of nine Iraqi women from diverse backgrounds, ages, and locations. Through individual monologues, these women share their stories, revealing a history marked by resilience amidst oppressive regimes and wars, including the Gulf Wars and the American occupation. Inspired by a visit to the Baghdad Museum in 1993, Raffo's play underscores the emotional depth, complexity, and resilience of these Iraqi women, whose stories intertwine to create a mosaic of a fractured Iraqi psyche. The play's solo performance format enhances the authenticity of these voices, embodying them as an amplified collective narrative. The play initially premiered at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh in 2003. Subsequently, it found success at the Bush Theatre in London, where it consistently ranked among the 'Five Best Plays' in London, as recognized by *The Independent*. The play continued to evolve and was featured in the 'New Work Now' festival of readings at the Public Theatre in New York in May 2004. It then premiered at the Manhattan Ensemble Theatre in October 2004 where it ran for nine months and received five extensions. The play won numerous awards and was a critic's pick of the *New York Times*, *Time Out*, and *Village Voice*.

Lameece Issaq and Jacob Kader's *Food and Fadwa*

Written by Lamees Issaq and Jacob Kader, *Food and Fadwa* (2014) tells the story of Fadwa, a Palestinian woman who escapes her Palestinian trauma and domestic drama by starring in her own make-believe cooking show as she prepares the food for her sister's wedding. The play's dramatization of the internal and personal space of a Palestinian family shies away from the troubling politics of its outside reality and renders the play insistently a drama about family and not politics. The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is certainly not absent but rather delicately sandwiched in between Fadwa's culinary talents, ambitions, and family dynamics. The playwrights aimed to direct the spotlight in *Food and Fadwa* towards the intricate, intimate, and everyday experiences of a Palestinian family, hoping this approach would be palatable to a theatre institution that is fundamentally resistant to Palestinian stories and voices.

Food and Fadwa was the inaugural production of Noor Theatre, a New-York collective of Arab Americans fostering, nurturing, and showcasing the creativity of Middle Eastern Americans artists. It became a Company-In-Residence at New York Theatre Workshop (NYTW) and *Food and Fadwa* was the first play with a Palestinian setting to be staged in 2012 at NYTW after the much-criticised cancellation of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*. *Food and Fadwa* received positive reviews from theatre critics and enjoyed a very successful and extended run at NYTW.

Jamil Khoury's *Precious Stones*

Precious Stones is the debut play for Chicago's Silk Road Rising theatre company (SRR) in 2002 by playwright and SRR's Artistic Director Jamil Khoury. The play queers the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and presents it through private negotiation of sexual and national identities mediated by dialogue and transgression of identity demarcation. The play presents

the possibility of crossing over national and sexual borderlines to initiate a seemingly unimaginable dialogue between two women, whose national belonging is dividing, but whose sexual belonging is unifying. Set in Chicago in 1989, the play introduces two diasporic women; Andrea, a Jewish American woman, born and brought up in Chicago, and daughter of Holocaust survivors from Krakow, Poland; and Leila, a Palestinian American woman, born and raised in Beirut, Lebanon and daughter of refugees expelled from Jaffa, Palestine in 1948. The two women embark on an Arab-Jewish dialogue project for their communities, but they finally become its only participants with a lesbian love affair fostering their efforts.

Precious Stones offers a glimpse of hope for a seemingly irreconcilable colonial conflict when Andrea and Leila invite the body and politics of gender and sexuality into their room of national conflict. By doing so, the play offers its hyphenated characters the chance to overstep the borders of their conflicting inherited national belongings and reach a compromise. *Precious Stones* moves in a quick tempo where Leila and Andrea are always dancing a dangerous tango, but one that might just lead to hope and resolution in an otherwise grim reality.

Jamil Khoury's Mosque Alert

Jamil Khoury's 2015 online play *Mosque Alert* is certainly worthy of an honourable mention. *Mosque Alert* addresses contemporary challenges confronting American Muslims, particularly the resistance to mosque construction. Inspired by real events like the Ground Zero mosque controversy and protests in Chicago, it portrays tensions among three families: the Muslim Khans and Qabbanis, and the Christian Bakers. Exploring themes of Islamophobia and identity, it aims to provoke dialogue on religious freedom and discrimination. The play employs a participatory model, utilizing digital spaces to engage

with audiences and explore themes of civic engagement and access and representation for minority artists and audiences.

These plays and Arab American drama in general offer fascinating narratives and employ intriguing dramatic devices while navigating their way into the American cultural mainstream, which often imposes restrictions on politically vocal or adjacent productions. In terms of content, Arab American drama has so much to offer. I argue that playwrights like Shamieh, Raffo, Issaq and others are part of a movement that I term ‘pragmatist feminism’ operating in a space where Arab American women find themselves both privileged and constrained by white liberal feminism while concurrently crafting their own form of feminism within the unique landscape of cultural production in the post-9/11. Furthermore, in Khoury’s work and glimpses in other Arab American plays, a new understanding of Arab American queerness is emerging. These two discourses of feminism and queerness are evolving as the playwrights problematize ethnic and religious Otherness, asserting their own representation against a problematic history of stereotypes and marginalization.

Arab American drama is rich with negotiations of what it means to be in-between cultures constantly revisiting cultural heritage and redefining the self at a historical moment of crisis. The playwrights and theatre makers mentioned here have been instrumental in creating the Arab American theatre movement. This movement, though still young, is already proving to be dynamic, innovative and disruptive. Theatre stages and educational curriculum will undoubtedly be the richer for recognizing and celebrating the value of Arab American theatre and its artists – reading these plays becomes, certainly, a must.

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Short bio:

Roaa Ali is a Lecturer in Creative and Cultural Industries at the University of Manchester. She is an interdisciplinary researcher focusing on race and diversity in the cultural sector. Roaa has a PhD in Drama and Theatre Arts from the University of Birmingham and her thesis explored Arab American and ethnic minority art production within the American cultural and creative industries. She writes extensively on issues of inequality, anti-racism, and the politics of cultural production in the creative industries. Out in 2024, her forthcoming monograph titled *The Cultural production of Otherness: Contemporary Arab American Drama* focuses on Arab American drama and interrogates issues of cultural production in post 9/11 white neo-liberal neo-orientalist 'benevolent' America. Her recent publication includes a co-edited volume titled *Arabs, Politics and Performance* (co-edited with Samer Al Saber and George Potter).