

## Review: Public Theatre's 'Pilgrims' is a 'must-see production'

Rob Tukey special to the Sun Journal  
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**The Lewiston theater's 'Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World' leads viewers to seek their own mecca.**

Have you ever had a moment when you thought the universe was trying to tell you something? The Maine premiere of "Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World" at The Public Theatre in Lewiston has once again brought to its audience a timely and timeless tale that may be one of those moments.



*Cab driver Musa, played by Ahmad Maher, and waitress Sheri, played by Laura King-Otazo, talk in the Maine premiere of "Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World" at The Public Theatre in Lewiston.*

Playwright Yussef El Guindi has created a beautifully written play as timely as today, yet anchored to the past. Migration, after all, brought us out of the African continent, the birthplace of mankind. Guindi's play is a love story — a romantic comedy of sorts — told through the acquired life experiences of a recent immigrant to America and a settled resident. At the same time, it is a parable of inclusion, common ideals and even differences that bind rather than separate us. It explores how men and women think, interact and react across cultures and heritages.

Directed by Executive/Artistic Director Christopher Schario, "Pilgrims" is a must-see production for everyone who believes in the wonder of love and the human experience.

The set, by Michael Reidy, is perfect. A seedy one-room second-floor flat with faulty wiring, naked lighting and quarrelsome upstairs neighbors is bordered by a classic New York City street with shops and stoops that invitingly recede into infinity. Lighting by Matthew Cost and music by Scott O'Brien create a mood and environment that allows the actors to show us places we have never been, in ways we should have always known. There is so much here that is common to us all if we simply take in the honesty, humor and truth within this wonderful tale of hope, trust and love.

The stellar cast of five brings authenticity and an undeniable nobility to each role. And each role reflects the essence of who we all are. Words alone fail to fully convey the quality of the individual performances here. To appreciate this performance, it must be seen.

The principal characters are Musa (Ahmad Maher), a cab driver, and Sheri (Laura King-Otazo), a saucy New York City waitress at an all-night diner. Musa is a recently arrived Egyptian immigrant who has learned English from the Quran (because he is familiar with the original) and from the paperback novels of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler.

Sheri has been a passenger before in Musa's taxicab. But tonight, at the end of both of their shifts around 2 to 3 a.m., he has invited her to his apartment for the first time. He is taking advantage of his roommate Abdallah's absence as the opportunity to take their acquaintance to the next level.

Sheri is a one-woman talkathon who wants to be seen as a “good girl.” Her loquacious nature reveals the image she desires; her insecurities surface as she calls attention to her body image, which she imagines to be fat. Musa genuinely disagrees and makes her feel beautiful. In the pre-dawn hours, the corner shop is open for night owls and junkies, the neighbors argue upstairs and, predictably, Musa and Sheri make love.



*Abdallah, Musa's roommate who is on the hajj — a pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia — is still very present in the Public Theatre's "Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World."*

Abdallah (Ian Eaton) is the Sudanese immigrant roommate who is away on the hajj, a pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. As Sheri sleeps, Abdallah drifts into her dream. He speaks of the wonderment of his success in America where he has made a niche business creating financial deals between other members of the immigrant community. He is making the pilgrimage to Mecca to share the religious experience with fellow Muslims from all nations. His pilgrimage is a symbolic contrast to the secular journey to America via New York that immigrants have made through the centuries. Eaton's Abdallah is powerful and convincing in his monologue. His joy is evident and his love for his new homeland is palpable. His apparition fades after an almost mystical reference to luggage, another symbolic thread through the plot.

Musa's Somali friend Tayyib (Ithamar Francois) is a Broadway peddler of suitcases, the symbolic emblem of belongings and baggage for immigrant and traveler alike. Sometime after Musa has begun his relationship with Sheri, as Musa and Tayyib sit in Musa's cab, Tayyib, the more worldly in the ways of women and America, tries to dissuade Musa from continuing his liaison with Sheri. He argues it is too fraught with cultural and religious differences (not to mention the eternal battle of the sexes) that are difficulties in relationships. He reminds Musa and reveals to us that Musa is engaged to Gamila (Aline Salloum). Gamila is an American-raised Egyptian who is currently in Cairo making wedding arrangements with Musa's parents. For Musa, who has appeared so honest and forthright, duplicity now raises its head. Gamila's return will certainly change the landscape; suddenly the eternal triangle looms like a pyramid.

Without giving too much of the story away, suffice to say Gamila and Sheri meet and the contrast between the practicing Muslim fiancée and the saucy American lover demonstrates the complicated self-created divide Musa now straddles. Throughout the second act, old ways and new ways collide, proclamations of love are made, betrayal decreed, explanations and overtures are expressed, promises issued, and the resolution of the love conflict is often in doubt.

Ultimately, conversations between the couples highlight the honesty and understanding necessary for successful relationships, whether intimate or universal. A hopeful future for all seems imaginable as the spotlight strikes the center stage apartment where Abdallah stands alone.

Once again Abdallah commands the stage with a moving, emotionally charged monologue that punctuates the moment and its eternal truth. Mecca is from whence we all came, the cradle of humanity. But we all must seek our own personal mecca. Abdallah is the universe and, indeed, is trying to tell us something.

Go to [ThePublicTheatre.org](http://ThePublicTheatre.org) or call 782-3200 for times and tickets for show times, which run through Sunday, with both matinee and evening performances.