the PUBLIC THEATRE

2022-23 Season - Audience Guide #2

An Audience Guide by Liz Carlson, Dramaturg
Visiting Instructor of Theatre, Bates College

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Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World
by Yussef El Guindi

An Audience Guide

The Public Theatre - Lewiston, ME
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Materials developed by Bates College Dramaturgy Students:
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THE PLAY

Plot Synopsis *(Warning: contains spoilers!)*

The play begins with Musa bringing Sheri back to his apartment late at night for the first time. They quickly develop a tight connection and later start dating. The same night, Sheri dreams of Musa's roommate, Abdallah, who is on his way to Mecca. Musa meets with his friend Tayyib, who tries to talk Musa out of pursuing a relationship with Sheri due to his engagement with Gamila, but Musa pushes back. Gamila returns home a few days earlier than expected to find Sheri naked in Musa's bed. At first, Gamila lies to Sheri, saying that she is Musa's sister. But later Gamila reveals that she is truthfully Musa's fiance. Musa goes to see Sheri at the diner, where she confronts him about keeping his engagement a secret.

After arguing with Sheri, Musa tells Gamila that he cannot be with her and wants to be with Sheri, but at the end of the conversation, they kiss. Eventually, Sheri and Musa decide to spend their lives together, and they move out of the apartment. Meanwhile, Tayyib joins Gamila for a night ride. Abdallah dies on his way to Mecca as his ship sinks.

Characters: Who's Who?

Musa - A Muslim taxi driver, originally from Cairo. Feeling trapped by his roots, Musa yearns for something new.
Sheri - A waitress in a diner. American by nationality and personality.
Abdallah - Musa's roommate. During the play, Abdallah is on a pilgrimage to Mecca.
Tayyib - Musa's friend. He is skeptical of Musa's relationship with Sheri.
Gamila - A modest Muslim woman and Musa's fiance. She has been in Cairo to discuss marriage details with Musa's family.

MORE TO EXPLORE

Words To Learn: Vocabulary from the play

Hookah (*Arabic*)- a tobacco pipe with a long, flexible tube that draws the smoke through water contained in a bowl.
Hajj (*Arabic*) - the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca that takes place in the last month of the year. All Muslims are expected to make Hajj at least once during their lifetime.
Ka'bah [Kaaba, Kabah] (*Arabic*) - a small stone building in the court of the Great Mosque at Mecca that contains a sacred black stone and is the goal of Islamic pilgrimage and the point toward which Muslims turn in prayer.
Qur'an [Quran] (*Arabic*) - the central religious text of Islam.
Chutzpah (*Yiddish/Hebrew*) - extreme self-confidence or audacity.
Hamd'illah asalam (*Arabic)* - Praise God for your well-being may God keep you well (there are elements of welcome home/back).

Cultural Context: The Modern Muslim Experience

The Five Pillars of Islam[1]

Muslims are obligated to fulfill five key practices throughout their lifetime. They are practices that emphasize Islam as a religion of peace. These are the foundations, or "pillars," of the Islamic religion:

Shahada (Faith)[2]
Muslims are obligated to declare their belief in Allah and the Prophet Muhammad.

Salah [Salat] **(Prayer)[3]**
Muslims perform ritual prayers five times a day, facing the qibla, the direction of the Ka'bah in Mecca based on the location of the one praying. Each prayer is performed at specific times of the day:

- Fajr - at dawn
- Zuhr - at noon
- Asr - late in the afternoon
- Maghrib - after sunset
- Isha - at dusk

Zakāt (Almsgiving)[4]
It is a Muslim's duty to make a charitable contribution to the needy by offering a portion of their wealth every lunar year. This portion is determined by nisab, the minimum percentage of one's wealth that must be donated.

[1] Islamic Relief
[2] Wikipedia (Shahada)
[3] Wikipedia (Salah / Salat)
[4] Wikipedia (Zakat)

Sawm (Fasting)[5]

Islam requires its followers to abstain from food, drink, smoking, and sexual activity during the holy month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar, and is a commemoration of the first revelation of the Prophet Muhammad. During Ramadan after sunset, Muslims break their fast with a meal called iftar where foods like Kahk and Amaar Adeen are served. Pregnant women may choose to abstain from fasting.

Sawm is observed from dawn to the adhan (the sound that summons Muslims to prayer) of Maghrib.

Hajj (Pilgrimage)[6]

A Muslim is required to make a sacred pilgrimage to the Kaaba (the "House of God") in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, the holy city of Muslims, provided that they are physically and financially able. Muslims circle the Kaaba counterclockwise seven times.

In the play, the pillars of **Salat** and **Hajj** were shown. Sheri mentions Musa praying every morning, an indication of the Fajr – at dawn - prayer of the pillar of Salat. Abdallah is also referenced to be fulfilling Hajj, as he is making his pilgrimage to Mecca.

Pilgrimage in Other Contexts

A pilgrimage is a journey. Folks from all backgrounds and faiths, like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism may undergo pilgrimages in honor of their faith. Others may take on a personally significant journey to expand their sense of ancestry or purpose in life. Some pilgrimages have holy destinations in mind, while others have no fixed final location. Regardless of how a pilgrimage takes shape, this practice is meant to enrich one's mind, body, and soul by means of moving through a different cultural and physical location.

Muslim Gender Norms[7]

The Quran states that men and women are spiritually equal, but there are laws set in many Muslim countries that prevent women from having the same rights/liberties as men. Furthermore, Muslims have traditional gender roles and social norms that are very prominent in the play.

Women's Traditional Dress

In Islam women are traditionally expected to wear modest clothing. Many Muslim women are expected to cover their hair after having their first period or reaching puberty. This is due to an interpretation of the Quran that describes curtains separating visitors from Prophet Muhammad's main house and his wives' residential lodgings[8]. It has also been interpreted as the seclusion of women from men in the public sphere; in a metaphysical dimension it could refer to "the veil which separates man, or the world, from God"[9]. Here is one such example of a hijab; note how it wraps around to cover the head, neck, and chest, but leaves a woman's face visible.

[5] Wikipedia (Fasting in Islam)
[6] Wikipedia (Hajj)
[7] Wikipedia (Gender roles in Islam)
[8] Piela, 2021
[9] Ibid.

Another form of modest dress in Islam is the niqab. After finding out about Musa's engagement, Sheri confronts him dressed in a niqab - a full-body garment, which even covers the face and is typically black. It is an interpretation of the hijab and modest dress but is the woman's own choice and interpretation of the Quran. Simply put by a Muslim woman "The Quran says to cover yourself modestly. Now, the interpretation of that is different for every group of Muslims. Some people believe it is just the loose dress. Others believe it to be an outer garment as well as a headscarf. Yet others would go one step further and say it's the face covering as well, because [the Quran] says to cover yourself"[10].

Women must not take off their hijab or veils unless they are with relatives with whom they have a close relationship, such as a husband. In the play, Gamila takes off her hijab in front of Musa in Scene 7, despite the fact that they are not married.

Men's Traditional Dress

When learning about the Hajj, Sheri exclaims how everyone circling the Kaaba is dressed in white. When entering a state of Ihram, the sacred state Muslims perform the Hajj in, men cannot wear sewn clothing[11]. Instead, they don a garment made of two seamless sheets, one around the waist and the other around the shoulder[12]. They cannot wear underwear or socks, and their heads must remain uncovered. This ritual signifies how all men are equal under Allah's eyes.

Prayer

It is expected that Muslim men carry out the five daily prayers at the nearest mosque. It is also customary that all pray in the Mosque on Fridays, but men, women, and children are segregated, with the women praying behind the men. However, Muhammad alludes in the Quran that it is recommended that women and children pray at home. He says that "A woman's prayer in her house is better than her prayer in her courtyard, and her prayer in her bedroom is better than her prayer in her house." In the play, Musa does not seem to mind praying while Sheri is in the same room, as she describes.

Sex and Sexuality

Sexuality in Islam aligns with its traditional gender roles of women being nurturers and men being providers and protectors. Modesty and chastity of women are strongly encouraged as discussed in the traditional dress section. We can see this from the contrast between Sheri and Gamila. Furthermore, sexual relationships are only acceptable within marriage. Musa does not follow this as seen from his relationship with Sheri.

Food

Alcohol

At the very beginning of the play Sheri and Musa drink scotch together and toast to temptation. In Islam, drinking alcohol is considered haram, or forbidden. This explains the characters' debate over being a good or bad Muslim, and why being gifted Johnny Walker was so frustrating for Musa, and why his Somali friend saw the gift as a "good way to prove [Musa's] faith".

[10] Ibid.
[11] Accor, 2023
[12] Accor, 2023

Kahk

In the play, Gamila brings Musa a plate of Kahk from his family. Kahk are small round biscuits originating from Egypt[13]! They are traditionally served at Eid-ul-Fitr, after the end of Ramadan[14]. Due to this, they are often called Kahk-el-Eid, or cookies of the feast. However, they are not specific to the Islamic tradition and are served at other Egyptian celebrations such as Easter, Christmas, and weddings[15]!

Kahk can be made plain or stuffed with agameya (a mixture of honey, pistachios, and dates), Turkish delight, or date paste. They often have unique designs on top and are covered with powdered sugar[16]! The designs can indicate what filling is in the kahk but can also be generationally passed down within families.[17]

Making Kahk is a very social activity, and women from a village would gather together to make it. Sometimes each woman would have a specific task in making the dessert, other times they were made individually at home and baked in a communal bakery[18]. Much like how families have individualized generational designs, families put personal ratios and blends of spices like cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, fennel, and mahlab in their recipes[19].

Now it's your turn! Make your own Kahk by following the recipe below!

This recipe was found on Kiran Afzal's blog Curious Cuisiniere.

Kahk	
For the Filling (agameya) ● 2 Tablespoons ghee (clarified butter) ● 1/4 cup all-purpose flour ● 12 Tablespoons honey ● 1 Tablespoon sesame seeds, toasted ● 4 Tablespoons finely chopped almonds (or another nut of choice)	For the Kahk Dough ● ½ kg (4 cups) all-purpose flour ● 1 teaspoon baking powder ● 1/8 teaspoon salt ● 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon powder* ● 300 g (1 1/3 cups) ghee (clarified butter) ● 50 g (1/2 cup) powdered sugar / icing sugar, for dusting ● ½ cup milk
Instructions: https://www.curiouscuisiniere.com/kahk-eid-cookies/	

Shay

Concerned about meeting Gamila, Sheri divulges how she has "switched from coffee to sweet tea the way your brother likes. Shay" (44). In Arabic, شاي عربي, or shay tea is an incredibly important drink that is served with breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Tea denotes hospitality, and thus is served commonly in Arab homes and businesses; furthermore, it is considered rude to reject an offer of tea. There are many types of shay including anise, cardamom,

[13] Afzal, 2023
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

cinnamon, thyme, sage, and chamomile among others. In the play, Sheri serves Gamila mint tea, which is Moroccan tea that is prepared with spearmint leaves and sugar. This specific type of tea helps clear the palate after meals[20].

Amaar Adeen
When saying goodbye to Musa, Gamila reveals that she had made amaar adeen for him. This is another dessert typically served during the Ramadan iftar meal and is essentially an apricot pudding.

The American Dream and the Immigrant Experience

The American Dream is an idea that was created during the 1900s and is the belief that anyone, regardless of where they were born or what class they were born into, can attain success in a society in which upward social mobility is possible. Many people migrate to America to pursue this dream, sometimes escaping governmental and societal oppression or war.

The immigrant experience is highly complex, as every immigrant has a different experience and worldview. Many immigrants coming to America experience culture shock: a feeling of disorientation when a person is suddenly subjected to an unfamiliar culture, lifestyle, or attitude. This play depicts various immigrant experiences through Musa's, Abdallah's, Tayyib's, and Gamila's characters. Each character goes through a different type of struggle in relation to their culture and the environment they find themselves in.

Though each character has a unique journey, there is a familiar feeling amongst migrants whose cultural backgrounds are heavily religious and favor tradition; an internal battle of whether to stay connected to one's roots or assimilate into American culture, this is particularly true for Musa.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Born in Egypt, raised in London, and now based in Seattle, Yussef El Guindi's work frequently examines the collision of ethnicities, cultures, and politics that face Arab-Americans and Muslim Americans. El Guindi holds an MFA in playwriting from Carnegie-Mellon University and has worked as a playwright at Silk Road Rising; literary manager for Golden Thread Productions; and playwright-in-residence at Duke University. He is the recipient of many honors, including the Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award and the 2010 Middle East America Distinguished Playwright Award.

An Interview with Yussef El Gundi

In late January, in the lead-up to our production, Yussef agreed to answer a few questions about the play from Bates College theatre students, Emily Maria Diaz and Lucie Green.

EMILY MARIA DIAZ & LUCIE GREEN: How or why did you construct the recurring motif of the suitcases?

YUSSEF EL GUINDI: It wasn't a motif for me as much as it was something that naturally came about during the natural unfolding of the play. If I'm doing my job as a writer (I speak here only for myself, as I know each writer works differently) I am intuiting my way through a play. Again, in subsequent drafts, I become aware of certain reoccurring actions and things that may well constitute themes and motifs. But even when I begin to better

[20] Wikipedia (Arabic Tea), 2022

understand what I have written, I try not to bend the play towards the obvious themes that it appears to be tackling. I don't want any play to become an illustration of a theme. The more a play is *un*-illustrative of the thematic currents running within and around the interstices of the text, so to speak, the more resonant and expressive it might hopefully be.

EMD & LG: Is the character of Abdallah functioning as a way to make the themes of pilgrimage and immigration more accessible to the audience?

YEG: I'm never that strategic when I write. When a character pops up and out I simply follow their lead and go where they go. Of course I'm not completely oblivious in subsequent drafts of how a character might function in the overall push and pull of a play. Abdallah for me represents the hope of the immigrant coming into his own through the act of migration. The connections and discoveries that can be made when you leave one shore and head for another.

EMD & LG: Sheri and Musa's relationship is held together by love and faith — do you feel like by the end of this play they have the tools they need to last?

YEG: I honestly don't know. They might well not last. I think each of the characters needs the other to get to their next chapter in their life. Musa needs Sheri to disengage from the familial, national, and any other obligations he feels burdened with, and Sheri, I've always felt, is on a personal pilgrimage of her own, a spiritual one. She keeps plugging into religious references in the play. There was a scene I cut where she talks with the ghost of Abdallah. Instead, she just has a dream about him. I've always suspected that Sheri might well convert to Islam a few years on, and, if she feels Musa is getting too loose and louche, morally speaking, she might ditch him. I've even speculated that after converting she might return and seek Gamila out as a fellow Muslim. But that's all for another play.

EMD & LG: In writing female characters caught in the age-old love triangle quandary, how do you avoid falling into generic, patriarchal tropes? How do Sheri and Gamila maintain their own agency/power?

YEG: As mentioned earlier, if I'm truly plugged in, I'm trying to get inside/ be the characters I write and not think of anything else. As writers will often say, "I try to get out of the way of my characters" and let them speak for themselves. The characters dictate the course of the action and the structure of the play. Now, obviously, I am a writer operating in whatever zeitgeist I happen to be in while I'm writing. The faults and follies of whatever time I write in will show up in the play as I try to situate my characters in that time. But in this play, and in any other play, you have to ask yourself who is driving the action of the play? Who has her/ his/ their hands on the steering wheel of the play? Those character(s) that determine the action are the ones who have agency and power. For me, Sheri in particular has effective and action-changing agency.

EMD & LG: Much of the dialogue in this play is comically argumentative given it sometimes takes entire pages for characters to understand each other (beginning of scene 3, for example) — how does communication break down and what does that reveal about the characters?

YEG: I'm not sure how to answer this question. People frequently have a hard time communicating with each other. Misunderstandings occur, feelings are hurt. And when people are trying to bridge the divide between cultures, those miscommunications and stumbles can easily multiply.

EMD & LG: Do you feel Musa is a moral character? Is he supposed to be?

YEG: I try not to judge my characters (unless I'm writing a satire). Musa for me is simply a conflicted character trying to make a decision that he knows will alter the course of his life.

EMD & LG: Gamila and Musa share a kiss right before Musa chooses Sheri — is this meant to be a final goodbye or one last test before committing to Sheri?

YEG: That for me is the point of the moment. The question you pose is probably the one both Gamila and Musa share with that kiss. I certainly want the audience to have that question in their minds as the scene ends: did Gamila and Musa just reaffirm/ rekindle their attachment/ fondness for each other or are they just sharing a kiss — from Gamila's point of view, something she hadn't yet done with Musa. With the kiss then functioning, for her, as a kind of period she's putting at the end of their relationship.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What character in this play do you resonate or identify with the most and why?

2. Have you ever embarked on a pilgrimage? What did it signify for you?

3. Do *you* think Musa and Sheri's relationship will last? Why or why not?

4. How important is shared culture, faith, or values in your relationships?

5. What does the American Dream mean to you? Is it achievable? Is it available to all?

Liz Carlson is a director and dramaturg, and teaching artist with an emphasis on new play development and ensemble practice. She is a Visiting Instructor in the Theatre Department at Bates College this year.

She has an MFA in Directing from Temple University and is an associate member of SDC (Stage Directors and Choreographers Society). She has worked with companies throughout the northeast including Curio Theatre Company, Arden Theatre Company, Lantern Theatre (Philadelphia), Troy Foundry Theatre, Saratoga Shakespeare Company (New York), The Nora (Boston), Trinity Rep, Manton Avenue Project (Rhode Island), and The Kenyon Review Playwrights Conference (Ohio). Additionally, she serves as a dramaturge to several playwrights, choreographers, and devising ensembles. She can often be found making work in unconventional spaces including libraries, prisons, and semi-abandoned industrial sites.

This semester at Bates she is teaching, among other things, Introduction to Dramaturgy. The students enrolled in this course used this play as their first project of the semester, exploring how research and engagement materials can enrich an audience's experience of a play. We hope you enjoy!