

The Idiolect

The language or speech pattern of one individual at a particular period of life

Return to ReOrient

November 7, 2012

By [Sam Hurwitt](#)

THEATER REVIEW: SAN FRANCISCO

[ReOrient 2012](#), Golden Thread Productions.



Roneet Aliza Rahamim and Nora El Samahy in *In the Days That Follow*. Photo by DavidAllenStudio.com.

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It's been a while since Golden Thread's last ReOrient festival of short plays about the Middle East. The festival had been going on an almost annual basis since 1999, but after its 10th anniversary in 2009 the company went on a producing hiatus, reemerging last year for the world premiere of Adriana Sevahn Nichols's [Night over Erzinga](#). But now the festival's back in a big way, with two programs of short plays (the second batch for two shows only toward the end of the fest) and a forum of panel discussions at Z Space.

Series A of the ReOrient Theatre Festival opened last weekend at Noh Space, just around the corner in the same complex, with a curious collection of one-acts. All the plays are world premieres except the first one, a 1944 short by the late, seminal Egyptian playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim. This first piece, *War & Peace*, seems at first to be a very traditional sex farce, as the young lover urges the sly, seductive wife of a general to run away with him, and then has to hide in wardrobe when her jealous husband comes home unexpectedly.

Director Hafiz Karmali gives the play a lively staging with the trappings of classic melodrama turned into broad comedy. Jesse Horne lays it on awfully thick as the skittish fop of a lover, with a tuxedo and cane, quaking at the thought of the husband coming home and squealing in recognition of the wife's designer gowns. (Costumer Michelle Mulholland does give her some very elegant

getups.) Garth Petal is very funny as the husband, warm and loving with his wife and fuming when his jealousy is aroused. Lena Hart is especially delightful as the sultry wife, playfully manipulating both of them with palpable delight.

Unless you read the program, you'd never know that this play is an allegory. The husband is War, the lover is Peace, and the wife is Politica. Politics flirts with Peace but is married to War and too attached to the financial incentives that War brings to ever leave it. The problem, of course, is that Peace is a cowardly twit (at least in this production), so I'm not sure what message that gives.

Local techie and first-time playwright Farzam Farrokhi's *2012* is more perplexing, though charming for all that. Petal plays a waiter in a small cafe, sneaking a bite of one of the apples on the table only to be chastened by an ominous sound from

above (the sharp sound design by Brendan Aanes). And of course, his name is Adam. In come three people in matching outfits that don't quite look like uniforms who sit at a table together, each absorbed with his or her smartphone. They're not acquainted, but it turns out that they know each other's work—each represents one of the Abrahamic religions, and one of them likens it to De Niro and Pacino finally meeting in a film. It seems that they're there for the apocalypse, or something very similar. It's really just a vignette, not really going anywhere with the premise once it's introduced, but Horne, Cory Censoprano, Roneet Aliza Rahamim make a likeable trio in Sara Razavi's staging.

Yussef El Guindi's solo piece *The Birds Flew In* is particularly powerful in Evren Odcikin's pared-down production, largely due to a riveting performance by Nora El Samahy as a bereaved immigrant mother raging at her dead son's insistence on enlisting in the military to prove he was an American. She beats herself up for giving him supposedly masculine toys to play with when he was growing up: "I should have raised him to be a sissy."

I have no idea what Silva Semerciyan's *Stalemate* is about. In three very short vignettes directed by Desdemona Chiang, Horne and Censoprano play two buddies. Horne's the bawdy yahoo of the two, making tacitly racist assumptions about women they're ogling, and Censoprano is the reluctant partner in crime. In the first bit they're two London salesmen angling for the same customer, in the second they're checking out a lady of the evening, and in the third they're in a war zone, suddenly on opposite sides of a conflict. How these two Londoners wound up in enemy armies is completely baffling, but that's because if you hadn't studied the program you'd have no idea that these are all different people in different places of the world. Without at least the ongoing characters that you'd otherwise assume these two to be, it's an open question what if anything the common thread running through this play is.

The longest of the plays, Jen Silverman's *In the Days That Follow* is a delight, beautifully brought to life by director Christine Young and the cast. Rahamim carries a great mixture of physical confidence and emotional insecurity as Orh, an intense young Israeli woman—a former soldier who still works out like one—who's moved to Boston because she's obsessed with a Lebanese poet and wants to translate her work into Hebrew, even hanging the poems all over her apartment. (Tanya Orellana's versatile set has great visual impact—a wall of bare slate with various cubbies built in to pull furniture out of.) El Samahy is poised and sympathetic as Iman, the poet, who tries to be kind to Orh while seeing her as the enemy and wanting nothing to do with her, the conflict between their homelands in no way abstract to her. Censoprano is priceless as Orh's neighbor Jake, a slacker dude who keeps barging in and flirting awkwardly with Orh. This whole play is nicely crafted and deeply touching, especially the tantalizing tastes of Iman's poetry that we hear.

Mona Mansour and Tala Manassah's *The Letter* is both very simple and very much ripped from the headlines. It's inspired by the sadly real incident of City University of New York trustee Jeffrey Wiesenfeld blocking an honorary degree for playwright Tony Kushner because of perceived hostility to Israel, in which Wiesenfeld said that any comparison between Israelis and Palestinians is offensive because "the comparison sets up a moral equivalence.... People who worship death for their children are not human." The play depicts a mild-mannered Palestinian-American CUNY science professor presenting a point-by-point scientific argument proving that Palestinians are in fact human, all too aware of the infuriating absurdity of having even to argue the point. That's pretty much all there is to the play, but what makes it work are the gentle humor of the professor and his more pissed-off daughter as embodied by Petal and Hart. Both characters are endearing awkward on stage, and a running gag about finding and staying in the spotlight is especially amusing, but the premise wears thin even as the indignation that it inspires endures.

The evening offers two hours of the profound and the abstruse, the silly and the sublime. It's a mixed bag in a way that it absolutely ought to be. When you're talking about the Middle East, you're talking about a multiplicity of cultures and an infinite variety of voices, opinions and styles, and ReOrient offers a bold and broad sampling that give us just a taste of that. And the scattered gems that are unearthed in the process make it an expedition worth taking.

ReOrient 2012 runs through November 18 at Noh Space, 2840 Mariposa St., San Francisco. <http://goldenthread.org>

Show #106 of 2012, attended November 4.