

# **Khemiri's Invasion! Islamophobia Meets Everyman--and Woman**

*Obie-Award-winning Invasion! returns to New York courtesy of The Play Company. Khemiri's virtuosic play delivers a stunning experience at The Flea Theater.*

Posted by [Deborah Greenhut](#) on Sep 11, 2011

Fair warning. Nothing is sacred in the world conjured by Khemiri's *Invasion!* People curse everything—themselves most of all. Language is a tool to be manipulated by everyone and often to a devastatingly hilarious effect. The stage, a classic, red-curtained proscenium arch structure, gives nothing away. Two brushed metal chairs, an oriental rug. Nothing is amiss. But then.

## **Culture of Remix Ten Years After**

*Invasion!* picks up where diversity training leaves off. Outside the seminar room, we live in a hostile world. Fake corporate politeness can't even hide it any more. The play explodes as a riveting 90-minute romp through the

evolution of the meaning of Abulkasem—Is he a demon? A feminist professor? Somebody’s lovable uncle? Zelig? Osama? *La Forza del destino*? We learn that Albukasem is everything and maybe, existentially, nothing. Not even your Mama’s Abulkasem.

Khemiri’s ever-morphing meaning of the word against a backdrop of world paranoia about Muslims forms the satiric action of the play, delivered in every genre we can name. No blinking allowed.

### **The Paranoid’s Alphabet**

[The Play Company’s](#) second production of *Invasion!*, now at The Flea, following its February Obie-award-winning debut at Walkerspace, brings back three of the original four cast members, in order of appearance: Andrew Ramcharan Guilarte, playing “Actor A”; Francis Benhamou, “Actor C”; and Bobby Moreno, “Actor D.” The four-member ensemble is completed by Nick Choksi in the role of “Actor B.” They instantly engage the audience in the world of the play, and the multi-faceted demands of the production are well met by the exceptionally talented ensemble.

There is no hero(ine); everything is, finally, “anti-“. As creative as people are, the absence of careful thought makes the world a horrifyingly dangerous place. Those who run from terror must run smack into those who manufacture it in the way they speak, and the outcome is unspeakable despite the number of words uttered.

Thanks to Erica Schmidt’s brilliant direction, the pacing of

the play locks onto the collective jugular vein until the last gasp of the text. And yet... *Invasion* is a hysterically funny play graced with inspired set design by Antje Ellermann, evocative costume design by Oana Botez-Ban, killer lighting design by Matthew Richards, and subtle Sound Design by Bart Fasbender. The decline of the social world has never looked better.

### **Elevating the Usual Suspects**

The generic character names are a sly Pirandello-like device, but the multitude of roles these outstanding actors take on are precise and linguistically rich everyday people—men, women, students, intellectuals, gays, straights, experts, migrant workers—the twenty first century’s usual suspects are all arrayed in savage satire that includes its audience as unwitting co-conspirators.

Khemiri, whose heritage is Swedish and Tunisian, has a fascination for all languages, and translator Rachel Willson-Broyles has helped this polyglot writer maintain what he described to [Eric Grode](#), writing for *The New York Times*, as a “balance between humor and tragedy.” Growing up biracial in Sweden, the playwright delivers an awesome perspective on assimilation from a planet of blaming projectors.

### **An International View of Contemporary Playwriting**

The Play Company, led by Founding Producer Kate Loewald and Executive Producer Lauren Weigel, received its own [Obie Award](#) in 2007 for bringing its global vision

to life off Broadway in New York. The prestigious award from the *Village Voice*, was given for The Play Company's contributions in 2007, and their premier of *Invasion!* introduced Khemiri to the New York Community and an Obie Award for Playwriting in 2011.

Including U.S. writers in their scope, the producers seek out and facilitate translations of international writing to "address our community's lack of access to plays from other parts of the world." The 2011-12 season includes the translations *Working on A SPECIAL DAY* (Mexico), a play adapted from Ettore Scola's 1977 film *Una Giornata Particolata*, and *The Ugly One* (Germany), by [Marius von Mayenburg](#).

### **Timely Affordable Drama**

The Flea Theater is located on White Street, just off lower Broadway in New York, and that, too, contributes a poignant dimension to the performance. A few short blocks away, street vendors yet sell dreamy New York skyline paintings that continue to feature the fallen twin towers. Were they painted before or after 9-11? No matter. America continues to crave them, and the unity it once sought has fragmented into suspicious armies on both sides of the blame.

Holy interpretive act. We are so not stardust or golden any more. *Invasion!* just might wake us from the lost American dream by showing us how stereotypes are born, live, and refuse to die even when they are destroying us from the

inside out. Khemiri lays the prayer rug at our feet; the actors yank it out. We laugh, we find our tears, and we are implicated in the rude world. See this play before Broadway catches on and raises the price.

### **Source**

- Eric Grode, "[Subversive Tongue and a Sharp Focus on Identity Politics](#)," *The New York Times/Theater*, 8 September 2011. Accessed online on 11 September 2011.