

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Carlos Cardona

The Splitting of the Moon*, Like an Old Widower's Heart

by Nicole Bindler**

[Theatre Philadelphia](#) and thINKingDANCE continue our partnership, begun in 2018, bringing coverage and new perspectives to Philadelphia's vibrant theatre scene.

I have never been in a theater with so many audience members audibly weeping. I am one of the bawlers. The actors, led by Palestinian writer and director, Amir Nizar Zuabi, have us in their grip. Zuabi's script, written in English for U.S. audiences, offers us a window into several classic Palestinian characters who represent the facets of Palestinian society at war with itself.

They meet onstage in twos and threes over 90 minutes, which could represent days, weeks, or months, during which they argue, dream, and transform. Much of the play takes place in front of vertical Venetian blinds that obscure and reveal a rocket building workshop, designed by Tal Yarden. The blinds are smoky and translucent, allowing for backlit shadows and projected moon rocket designs to be cast upon them.

Yusef, the protagonist in a brown professorial jacket, played by Khalifa Natour, embodies the poet who urges his people to continue to dream and create in the face of the ongoing, soul-crushing Israeli occupation. In the wake of his grief over his deceased wife, he pours his heart—and the income from selling his olive groves—into the moon.

The Sheik, a longtime friend of Yusef's family, played by Motaz Malhees, who wears a traditional Muslim [thawb](#) and [taqiyah](#), personifies the conservative religious folks who aim to bring stability to a society in constant upheaval.

Jawad, played by suit-clad Alaa Shehada, epitomizes the Palestinian business people who strive for normalcy through development and consumption to the extent that living under apartheid allows.

Fadel, played by Ivan Kevork Azazian, a lanky vegetable delivery person working for his father in a one-piece utility suit, has decided to turn down a graduate school full scholarship in the U.S. to stay in Palestine. He reminds us of the omnipresent choice to leave or stay among those with the opportunity to emigrate.

Finally, and perhaps most compellingly, Lila, played by Fidaa Zaidan, with a springy half-ponytail and a three-quarter sleeved salmon-colored dress that similarly bounces as she paces the stage, is the exemplary Palestinian woman. Multiple social forces and oppressions sheer through her character as she lives in conflict between keeping her family connected, and her desire to fully realize her intellectual capacities and take political action against the occupation. She grapples with pressures to cook roast chicken for her grieving father, Yusef; feigns enthusiasm at the furniture purchases of her fiancée, Jawad; and grieves the loss of her own dreams to study and thrive professionally.

Inside of his shed with hanging blueprints and indiscernible mechanical objects, Yusef is building a rocket to the moon as a “middle finger” to an occupation that, to him, presents endless “stop signs for the imagination.” All the others, except for Fadel, who desperately wants to help in order to give his grocery-filled life meaning, attempt to stop Yusef.

Ironically, Jawad, whose capitalist endeavors in real estate contribute to the occupation by normalizing it, believes Yusef must be a collaborator with the Israeli military. The Sheik argues that Yusef’s plans “go against God,” while Yusef asserts “this is celebrating God.” Lila is simply worried about her father’s wellbeing. He is similarly worried about hers in light of her choice to marry such a conventional man, “I don’t want you to choose a safe man so you can change my diapers when I’m old.”

Yusef’s poetry ultimately unifies these characters around a common goal of remembering who they are as Palestinians, “The Americans can go to the moon because they have no weight. This place is so heavy we can’t even leave it in our imagination.” The metaphor of the moon’s weight, pull, and movements draw them closer to each other. Yusef reminds the Sheik that [the moon is featured prominently](#) in the Quran and describes gravity acting on him as an act of God, “The only reason we are not flying away is that everything is in motion.” Yusef’s imagination infects Fadel, who tells Lila, “The moon is in everything, even your tears.”

With the Israeli Defense Forces closing in on their village, and the haunting post-traumatic stress Yusef and Lila both face from Yusef having been imprisoned for writing a political pamphlet, I cannot fathom how reviewers for the [Washington Post](#) and the [New York Times](#) emphasized the apolitical aspects of this play. The political content is personalized so deeply in these characters, who perform close to the audience on a shallow stage, that the story feels intimate and distinct, yet, the reality of Palestinian struggle they portray is so prevalent that I suspect our tears are not just for these individuals, but for the losses faced by an entire people.

**This particular Quranic verse is not explicitly mentioned in the play, however, the prevalence of the moon in the Quran feels poetically relevant to the performance.*

***Bindler has previously written about Palestinian dance and culture for tD. See the links below for more:*

[The Sea as a Dorway and a Border](#)

[Free Advice and an Interview with Farah Saleh](#)

[Archiving Occupation, Identity, and Resistance](#)

[Women](#)

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[Grey Rock](#), Remote Theater Project, SEI Innovation Studio inside the Kimmel Center, February 6-9.

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