

“A Series Defined: The State of Semitic Commonwealth” by Founding Artistic Director Jamil Khoury

Where politicians and diplomats fail, artists and storytellers may yet succeed. Not in ratifying a peace treaty between Israel and Palestine, but in building the sort of social and political connectivity that enables resolution. In the absence of healthy relationships, and amid the persistence of narratives that reproduce staticity, Malek Najjar, Corey Pond, and I have curated Semitic Commonwealth, a staged reading series comprised of six plays that explore the human toll of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Not with timelines, statistics, and SWOT analyses, but a laser sharp focus on the personal prices paid by those most affected.

To this end, we have assembled a team of distinguished playwrights of Arab and Jewish backgrounds: Ken Kaissar, Ismail Khalidi, Hannah Khalil, Motti Lerner, Mona Mansour, and Zohar Tirosh-Polk—all of whom have written plays that propel the discourse well beyond the predictable enmities and righteous posturing, the monotonous talking points and selective memories that have stifled progress for far too long. These plays do not march in lockstep, but are dynamic, original, challenging, provocative, complicated, funny, painful, and sometimes controversial. They are plays that explore themes of identity, justice, occupation, exile, history, and homeland with remarkable honesty and integrity.

Semitic Commonwealth is all about leaving one’s comfort zone. The plays vary widely in thematic content, dramatic structure, and time and place, and pose difficult questions without presuming to offer answers. They enable audiences to arrive at their own conclusions and they encourage dissent. We never set out to achieve balance or moral equivalency, nor to provide equal airing to “both sides” (as if there are only two sides!). This is not about rooting for one’s team. There’s no home court advantage, and no one is keeping score.

The only conscious parity exists in the identities of the playwrights. Three identify as Jewish and Israeli, while three identify as Arab (two are Palestinian, one Lebanese). Three are women, three are men, and I imagine that all six identify as politically progressive, judging from their conscious adherence to the inquisitive, self-questioning, and humanistic traditions of the left. These artists find truth and humanity in characters with whom they agree and disagree, and eschew the didacticism, polemics, and policing of thought that we can only associate with the worst of political theatre. No one is being force-fed a politic at Silk Road Rising, and we detest propaganda.

Semitic Commonwealth is not about legitimizing or delegitimizing. Such utterances as “There’s no such thing as a Palestinian,” or “Jews have no connection to the land,” or “My claim is greater than your claim” have no place in our discourse. We abhor the delegitimization projects that are so rife on the extremes. Nor is it a competition over who has suffered greatest and longest. It is not a normalization campaign (normalizing military occupation and asymmetrical power) nor is it an anti-normalization campaign (opposing mutually beneficial cooperative relationships between parties on the ground). It is instead a series of thoughtful, well-written plays that can help us evolve.

So anyone looking for anti-Semitism and Jewish conspiracy theories or anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia, Palestinian victim blaming or Jewish Holocaust denial, had better look elsewhere. If you’re looking for stories that conflate Palestinians with terrorism or Israelis with fascism, we are not your storytellers. Ours is a space for neither the erasure of Palestinian displacement, nor

what I call the “duality of Israeli exceptionalism” (Israel as exceptionally good or exceptionally bad). Rather, to borrow a popular adage of Silk Road Rising’s, Jews and Palestinians are “neither angels nor demons but real human beings,” with all the hopes and fears, challenges and complexities, triumphs and failures, that characterize being human.

I’m proud that Silk Road Rising has created a space that accommodates a spectrum of views on this issue. I’m proud that our audience includes passionate supporters of both Israel and Palestine. In fact, I’m awed that such ideological diversity has converged on our 85-seat theatre—a hard-won affirmation that our mission is working. Conversations over the years have revealed to me an audience that includes Palestine solidarity activists, Jewish community leaders, Arab journalists, Israeli diplomats, and, of course, Arab and Jewish theatre lovers! Our plays have been engaged by partisans of both the Birthright Israel and Palestinian Right of Return movements, by BDS organizers (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) and champions of Aliyah (Jewish immigration to Israel). And of course, our patrons even include those afflicted with what I refer to, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, as “Israel/Palestine Exhaustive Stress Disorder.”

Yes, there has also been pushback. Some of it ugly. For example, the Jewish audience member who complained about there being “too many Muslims” in the house the night he attended a show, or the Arab audience member who left an angry voicemail berating my “associating with Zionists,” or the indictment of an Israeli Jewish playwright deemed insufficiently anti-Israel by some and insufficiently pro-Israel by others, and therefore “dangerous,” “self-hating,” and a “tool of the enemy” (could he be a double agent?). But on the whole, we’ve witnessed gratitude and relief that a theatrical space exists for the democratic exchange of ideas surrounding these difficult and contentious debates.

Perhaps it is the persistence of the above-cited pushback that vindicates the urgency of Semitic Commonwealth. To varying degrees, all participating playwrights have combatted efforts to censor and vilify their work; which, for me, is all the more reason to be producing them. Furthermore, the pursuit of justice continues to be undermined by an absence of Palestinian voices in American theatre. As communities of theatre makers, we bear responsibility for perpetuating a deafening silence around Palestine, an inequity we should be addressing loudly and collectively. Many theatres are also reluctant to produce Israeli Jewish playwrights who question and challenge dominant narratives about Israel. The three Israeli playwrights who’ve joined us on this journey care deeply about Israel and its future—in my book, they’re Israeli patriots. And yet some have accused them of demonstrating “disloyalty.” These allegations not only sabotage artistic freedom, they impair the robust dialogue we so desperately need.

Truth be told, a plethora of opinions already exist within our audiences and they’re primed for lively deliberation. I’ve spoken to people who envision peaceful, equitable coexistence between the two nations and people who envision a carefully managed truce; people who wish to expand Israel’s borders and people who wish to dismantle Israel altogether; people with deep knowledge of the issues, and people who demonstrate profound ignorance and lack of empathy. I have been privy to testimonies about the deep love of homeland felt by both Palestinians and Jews. Those testimonies have moved and affected me greatly. I want Palestinians to be able to exercise their love of homeland with the same freedoms and rights that are enjoyed by Jews. No matter one’s politics, I trust we can all agree on that.

By and large, I find that most theatregoers are eager to learn and be challenged. Our art form is both inspirational and aspirational. People attend theatre to be impacted, and I've yet to meet a playwright who doesn't somehow wish to make the world a better place. When you create art from your own subjective experiences, your truth can elevate others, and parallels can begin to emerge. Good theatre not only touches the heart and mind, but also the soul. On two unrelated occasions, I heard from a Jewish artist and a Muslim artist that the theatre is a "sacred space," and that encountering a play is the spiritual equivalent of reciting prayers or attending a service. It's not my place to say one way or the other, but I find this an interesting idea to ponder.

I think it also important to consider the "constituent audiences" for whom Semitic Commonwealth holds particular appeal. Not to diminish or negate our other audiences (whose participation is vital) but to illuminate the diversity among Chicago's Arab American and Jewish American theatregoers. Our Jewish audience is decidedly the larger of the two. It is primarily Ashkenazi (U.S., European, and Israeli born), the majority of whom self-identify as cultural Jews or observant Jews (varying definitions of observance), and describe themselves as Zionist, anti-Zionist, non-Zionist, or post-Zionist. Many have also expressed ambivalence towards Zionism, or a conditional embrace of Zionism.

Our Arab audience hails primarily from Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. It includes immigrants as well as those born in the United States, and counts Muslims, Christians, progressives, conservatives, nationalists, secularists, and religionists within its ranks. They identify typically as Arab American, or by country of origin (often both), and pay widely divergent levels of attention to Palestine/Israel. For those not in the know, cultivating and expanding our Jewish and Arab audiences has been a high priority since our company's founding. Facilitating deeper engagement and greater interchange within and between the communities, well beyond the run of Semitic Commonwealth, is vital to our mission. Indeed, Semites have a home at Silk Road Rising!

So whether you view this conflict through a peace and justice lens and a human rights lens, as I do, or through a nationalist lens, a religious lens, an identity lens, an anti-colonial lens, a post-Holocaust lens, an American interests lens, an engaged learner lens, or any combinations thereof, Silk Road Rising welcomes you to Semitic Commonwealth. We need your voices and you need our stories—call it constructive codependence. Granted, we are neither naive nor self-aggrandizing enough to suggest that twelve staged readings of six plays at a Chicago theatre will suddenly change the immediate circumstances surrounding Israel/Palestine—but woe to him who underestimates the potential ripple effects of Semitic Commonwealth. Culture is destiny, I believe. As such, we are planting seeds to grow into roots that sprout narratives and shape new realities. Not swords into plowshares, but plays into plowshares. Ambitious and bold? We wouldn't have it any other way.