

## CROSSING ORLANDO

By Jamil Khoury, Founding Artistic Director, Silk Road Rising  
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Omar Mateen made me gay. Well, not “made,” that honor belongs to God. But the homophobic mass murder Mateen committed on June 12, 2016, at Pulse, a popular LGBTQ nightclub in Orlando, Florida, reintroduced me and many others I know to earlier versions of our gay selves. Amidst the tremendous pain, shock, and anger of these past nine days, a certain phrase has been repeating in my head, “I’m gay again.” Emotions and fears I had long “forgotten,” coddled by the false sense of security evoked by a “safe” urban bubble, have resurfaced with a vengeance. Once again, I’m reminded just how vulnerable and at risk we are, parsing the world between those who hate us and those who do not. And once again, Pride is about the sanctity and dignity of queer lives, not commercialism, not political pandering, not premature victory dances.

49 precious lives, mostly queer, mostly Puerto Rican, mostly young, were taken in what *The New York Times* called “the largest mass killing of gay people in American history.” May their memory be eternal. It was also the deadliest attack within U.S. borders committed by a single gunman. It is not lost on us that the 29 year old Mateen was of a Silk Road background and that his heritage and religion quickly became “evidence” in explaining his motivations. Frankly, I have no idea what compelled Omar Mateen to massacre innocent people. Radical Islamism? Mental illness? Gay self-hatred? Steroid use? Some toxic combination thereof? To be honest, at this point, I really don't care. All I know is that 49 lives will never be returned to us and that countless other lives will never be the same; that 53 human beings are fighting to save their lives, their bodies menaced from gunfire (an all too familiar scenario here in Chicago). Our thoughts and prayers go out to each one of them. I cannot even begin to imagine the unbearable pain being felt by the victims’ families and loved ones. How does one ever heal from such devastating loss?

Amidst all the horror arose very personal struggles as well. In a stinging footnote to his trail of blood, Omar Mateen dragged my husband Malik and I (and countless others) back to the intersection of homophobia and Islamophobia. Not a place we wanted to be. Certainly not during the holy month of Ramadan and Pride month. And yet the demands of responding, and kicking into activist mode, were impossible to resist. Malik in particular has been demonstrating critical leadership at this time as a gay Muslim man. In calling on Muslim communities to acknowledge, challenge, and weed out homophobia, and to welcome *and* affirm LGBTQ Muslims as full members of the Muslim community, Malik has inspired people of all faith backgrounds to hold their communities accountable for hate and intolerance. “If anything, Orlando should bring Muslims, non-Muslims, and gay people closer together, not drive us further apart,” he has said. Vilifying Muslims for the crimes of Mateen may serve those who peddle a “clash of

civilizations” narrative, but it wreaks emotional and physical havoc on millions of our fellow Americans, to the great detriment of us all. Scapegoating Muslims and ascribing collective guilt is immoral and wrong and it needs to stop!

So okay, I’m gay again and I’m proud, but I’m also really, really sad. Fortunately, my faith in the healing power of storytelling is stronger than ever. There’s a lot of catharsis out there just waiting to be staged.