

## **Critical Praise for Racial Profiling: Responding to Hedy Weiss**

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Racial profiling: the use of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or national origin by law enforcement agents as a factor in deciding whom to investigate, arrest or detain absent evidence of a specific crime or criminal behavior. (Rights Working Group)

In her review of Silk Road Rising's Midwest premiere production of Jonas Hassen Khemiri's play *INVASION!* (August 6, 2013), Chicago Sun-Times theatre critic Hedy Weiss begins by asserting that "The global terror alerts dominating the news in recent days certainly do not help the arguments being made by Jonas Hassen Khemiri in his play, *Invasion!*..." It is from there that Hedy proceeds to make the case for racial profiling. In responding to Hedy's review I am contesting neither her assessment of the play nor our production of it. I am contesting her support for racial profiling. For those not in the know, *Invasion!* is a play that challenges and deconstructs the racial profiling of Muslim and Arab men in the West. It is a play that humorously disentangles terror scares in the Middle East from how we perceive the Muslims living next door. If anything, "the global terror alerts dominating the news in recent days" serve to bolster the play's arguments, unless of course "Muslim" and "terror" are somehow synonymous.

Hedy continues: "Part satire, part agit-prop, part impassioned look at identity politics, Khemiri's play (with an English translation by Rachel Willson-Broyles), is a cry against Muslim profiling. But coming at the very moment the U.S. State Department found it necessary to issue a worldwide alert warning of planned attacks in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia 'by al-Qaeda or its affiliates,' a certain skepticism met those cries." With the stroke of a pen, Hedy conflates Muslims with "al-Qaeda or its affiliates," and casts suspicion on those who'd protest the injustice of being racially profiled. Presumably Hedy exempts herself from experiencing such indignities (oh, the privileges of being white) and reserves said violations for others.

Hedy's support for racial profiling then turns more explicit when she declares "But despite Khemiri's passion, those still thinking of the horrific terrorist attacks at the Boston Marathon might be tempted to ask: What practical alternative to profiling would you suggest?" Well, not profiling for starters. Unless we're willing to swap everything that makes this country worth living in for some false sense of security in a racially paranoid police state. So why then is Hedy Weiss voicing support for a long discredited practice inextricably linked to our nation's history of racist violence? Night after night watching plays and that's the conclusion she arrives at? The murder of Trayvon Martin wasn't compelling enough? Surely Hedy's not parroting the FOX News verdict on Muslims and Arabs, guilty by virtue of being Muslim or Arab? Then again, she's willing to deny us due process and the presumption of innocence. If it erodes our American citizenship, so be it. It's what racial profiling does. Get used to it!

As a Jew, Hedy understands racial profiling. I believe she understands racial profiling exceedingly well. She knows what it means to be assigned collective guilt. She knows what ascribing collective blame leads to. She knows the dangers of defaming an entire community. Said knowledge informs Jewish consciousness and Jewish ethics. And Hedy knows all too well the power of words. She's a writer. She knows how words shape attitudes and perceptions and policies. Why then is the chief theatre critic of the Chicago Sun-Times using her position of power to advocate injury and harm against vulnerable communities of fellow Americans? And why in God's name is she allowed to get away with it?

Sure, Hedy has every right to her opinions, offensive as they may be. Just as I have every right to challenge her opinions and shed light on their very dangerous implications. Apparently even her own editor agrees (in part). As of August 7th, Hedy's "practical alternative to profiling" question was removed

from the online version of the review (although it remains in the print version) with an editor's note that reads: "A previous version of this review contained language about racial profiling that may have been perceived as expressing a political opinion. This is an updated version of that review." As Hedy's politics in the review are abundantly clear, I must dispute the "may have been perceived as expressing a political opinion" disclaimer. And while I appreciate her editor making this change, it is woefully insufficient and downright offensive to Sun-Times readers, particularly readers from communities that are, or have been, racially profiled! A more appropriate response from the Chicago Sun-Times would be a formal apology to Chicago's Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern, and South Asian communities, and a disavowal of Hedy's Islamophobic and anti-Arab views.

Consider the first three paragraphs of Hedy's review in which we are inundated with "terror alerts," "U.S State Department," "worldwide alert," "planned attacks," "al-Qaeda," "horrific terrorist attacks," and "Boston Marathon." I believe the lack of subtlety here is deliberate, it is calculated. Hedy's appealing to racial animus, to white nativism. She's playing to base fears of Muslims and Arabs. She's reminding me of Ann Coulter. She then follows it up with a few paragraphs praising the production, the direction and the performances, and concludes with "Polished, to be sure. But I still don't buy it." Her editor has since changed that last line to read: "But I still don't buy the play's arguments." Ostensibly, that's an improvement.

Just to be clear, racial profiling is not a "tool" of law enforcement. It is not a "method" of collecting intelligence. It is not a "policy option" or an "instrument" of national security. Oh no. Racial profiling is a pernicious form of racism. Its intent is to humiliate, dehumanize and intimidate entire communities. The objective of racial profiling is to keep suspect classes "in their place." It is state-sanctioned violence designed to make "the public" feel "safe." Racial profiling operates under one overriding assumption: white people are innocent, law abiding citizens; people of color are suspect and criminal. Perhaps Hedy should ask African Americans if they could suggest any practical alternatives to profiling. Native Americans? Mexican Americans? Japanese Americans? 125,000 Japanese Americans shipped off to internment camps because no one suggested a "practical alternative to profiling?" Well, too bad for them. Hey, it didn't affect me.

Perhaps Hedy should consult the vast majority of America's law enforcement and national security professionals who contend, quite adamantly, that in addition to being morally and ethically wrong, racial profiling simply doesn't work. Racial profiling makes us less safe, not more safe. Not surprising, seeing that racial profiling violates our civil rights and the U.S. Constitution's 14th Amendment, which guarantees equal protection under the law. Equal protection for all, that is. When we isolate communities under heightened suspicion based on ethnicity or race or religion, we deny those communities the full rights of citizenship. Is Hedy really suggesting that Americans of Muslim, Middle Eastern and South Asian backgrounds be consigned to an inferior position of citizenship?

As community policing is an essential component of successful law enforcement, it is incumbent upon America's police forces to maintain respectful partnerships with the communities in which they serve. In other words, a community that is racially profiled is unlikely to help out its profilers! Nothing undermines trust and cooperation faster and more effectively than the racial antagonism inherent in being profiled. In shifting suspicion from behavior to race, racial profiling distracts law enforcement from doing its job. Far from preventing violence, as Hedy might imagine, racial profiling actually aggravates racially-motivated violence, particularly against people of color (case in point, the Sikh Temple shootings in Oak Creek, Wisconsin).

So Hedy's review has generated outrage and pain. It has stirred hurt and confusion in Chicago's theatre community, Chicago's Asian and Middle Eastern communities, among people of conscience. Hedy's endorsement of racial profiling is not only repugnant and morally reprehensible, it is unacceptable to the community of artists she writes about and to her readers. We want clarity from Hedy. We want an explanation from her as to why she would go so far as to publicly endorse the cruelty that is racial profiling. What is Hedy really thinking about Chicago's Asian and Middle Eastern theatre artists?

Chicago's theatre artists of color? People with names like Malik and Jamil? Apparently she's thinking we should all be racially profiled.

**Postscript from Jamil Khoury:**

Some of the statements surrounding my response to Hedy Weiss are attempting to shift the conversation to one about censorship rather than one about racial profiling. I am not calling for censorship. I am a producer of political theatre! Surely there is room to oppose both racial profiling and censorship. The wish for an apology or disavowal from the newspaper is just that, a wish. It is not a call for censure. We are not challenging Hedy Weiss' review of *INVASION!* because we contest her right to voice political opinions. We are contesting her endorsement of racial profiling, a dangerous, racist policy that renders people of color suspect. We are also challenging the Islamophobic and anti-Arab views expressed in her review. Weiss has every right to voice her opinions, just as we have every right to voice opposition to those opinions. If anything, there needs to be more political analysis in contemporary theatre criticism, not less. The conscious de-politicization of arts journalism in this country is a trend we should be working to reverse.

*Silk Road Rising* is a love letter to the First Amendment. The plays we produce would be censored or banned in many countries along the Silk Road. Our voice cannot exist without freedom of speech.