

## Humor Me Some Social Change

By Jamil Khoury, Founding Artistic Director, Silk Road Rising  
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My name is Jamil Khoury and I study the political utility of art. Too general. My name is Jamil Khoury and I study the diplomatic efficacy of theatre. Too ambiguous. My name is Jamil Khoury and I study the dialectics of storytelling and social change. Too academic. My name is Jamil Khoury and I study the empathic functions of humor. Whatever.

Now that I've introduced myself, and established my "scholarly" credentials, how about indulging me a few terrorist attacks? Specifically, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. That Mother of all Terrorist Attacks. Gut-busting, sidesplitting, rip-roaring funny, right? Not even remotely. But a catalyst. And a damn good one. When me and my husband, Malik Gillani, set out to create Silk Road Rising, we envisioned a theatre company that could articulate a "proactive, artistic response" to 9/11. Our destiny was to become 9/11 second responders, responding both to the hatred and fanaticism that fueled the attacks and to the anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, anti-Brown people backlash that quickly ensued. First Al Qaeda hijacked Islam, then public anger hijacked our citizenship.

From the get-go, our activist logic maintained that although our work would be serious and political, humor would be an integral ingredient, the fermenter of provocative ideas. The plays we'd produce would employ humor as a point of clarity and connection. Not to make light of a situation, but to deepen our understanding of it. Which means the humor would be organic to the stories we'd tell, neither gratuitous nor diversionary. A company birthed in trauma cries out for empathy, and empathy manifests viscerally. We knew instinctively that the laughter that transcends barriers is the substance of social change. Unpacking a clash of ignorance masquerading as a "Clash of Civilizations" demands irony and satire and parody and sarcasm. For when the world gets divided into monolithic, historically fossilized, spatially demarcated "civilizations" forever at war with each other, it's time to call in the humorists!

Who can deny that Islam vs. the West garnered enormous traction? Even "justified" a few pointless wars. Pegging Asian Americans and Middle Eastern Americans in the crosshairs of a giant bullseye. All part of an ongoing trajectory. From the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War to the national security tropes now "generously" affixed to all people Brown, engaging the "enemy" has always been denuded of humor, quite strategically so. Thus the road to our polycultural redemption would be navigated by the humor that binds. Mainstream America would laugh with us, not at us. They'd laugh with us as we'd laugh at them and they'd identify with us as we'd laugh at ourselves. Those would be the crystallizing moments, when the recognition of our shared humanity would converge in our shared laughter. Consider this snippet from my play *Precious Stones*, a Palestinian/Jewish/Lesbian geo-political whirlwind:

BASSIMA. My husband was killed, murdered in fact, by YOUR PEOPLE!

ANDREA. We all froze. And then, straight from Rachel's lips...

RACHEL. Lesbians? Lesbians killed her husband?

There was method to our madness. Our idea was to create a playwright focused theatre that would showcase playwrights and protagonists of Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds. We would use the historic Silk Road as both a geographic guide and a metaphor for cultural interchange. And we would counter the misrepresentation and negative representation of Silk Road communities with self-representation. But our work would not be celebratory. It would not be "how much I love being Arab" or "how proud I am to be Chinese" or "how fun it is to be Indian." We would not pathologize victimology

and self-pity. Nor would we be a self-esteem project; performative therapy aimed at making us feel good about ourselves. Instead we would take our precious identity markers and subvert them, mess them up. Orthodox identity politics would no longer be sacrosanct. They'd be the butt of our jokes.

Mindful of our contested Americanness, we would set out to demonstrate that Silk Road peoples are neither angels nor demons, but real people. As flawed, conflicted, heroic, and fabulous as everyone else. And dammit, we're funny! Our stories would reflect that. Stories that are complicated and complex, three dimensional, controversial even. Stories that resist the cultural silos and narrative ghettos of an antiquated multiculturalism. Our cultural specificities would exude universality. The Arab immigrant seeing his story as part of a broader American story. The fifth generation German American seeing her story in the story of a Japanese "war bride." That is how we'd measure success, in the parallels and the knowing moments. With humor leading the way.