

Performance Response

Oh My Sweet Land: A Love Story From Syria

Written and Directed by: Amir Nizar Zuabi. The Play Company.
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by Vivian Appler



Fig. 1: Nadine Malouf performing *Oh My Sweet Land*.
Photographer: Pavel Antonov.

We step out of the subway station in Park Slope, check the address emailed the previous day, and walk about a block to the Brooklyn brownstone to ensure we're in the right place. We're early, so we stroll past the restaurants on the outskirts of the residential neighborhood and select a place to eat afterwards – we know we'll be hungry for food and conversation after the show. This complicated prelude to performance is due to the special demands of the U.S. premiere of *Oh My Sweet Land: A Love Story from Syria*, written and directed by Amir Nizar Zuabi and performed by Nadine Malouf. The Play Company solicited the temporary donation of private kitchens for the production of this one-woman show in which the preparation of the traditional Syrian dish *kubeh*, a small, savory fried meat pastry, anchors the action of the play. The performance begins with an emailed address and a trek to a stranger's home. The search initiates a viscerally empathetic relationship with the protagonist, together

embarking upon an impossible quest for a disappearing country. I take my seat in the front row (there are only two). Malouf is toasting pine nuts and making easy eye-contact with the dozen-or-so audience members whose journeys have just begun.

The play's production history is itself a travelogue of migration and politics. *Oh My Sweet Land* was originally conceived by award-winning actor Corinne Jaber, who is of Syrian-German descent. Jaber and Zuabi collaboratively developed the play for its 2013 Swiss premiere, at which point 90,000 people had already been killed in Syria's civil war. In 2017, over 480,000 Syrian people have died in a war that has escalated to engage many more international and extremist factions, all to the detriment of the country's citizens. Minor dramatic adjustments to geographic situation make all the difference in the play's potential to engage American audiences with the current, global refugee crisis. In the play's transit from Europe to the United States, the protagonist, now played by Malouf, remembers growing up in Denver, Colorado, not München, and her present is in New York, where we are all gathered bear witness to Syria's still-unfolding history.

In *Oh My Sweet Land*, cooking and narration mingle to create surprising, often deeply disturbing, confluences of current events, foodstuff, and kitchen technology. 'Wheat. Meat. Heat. Syria.' Over the course of the play, Malouf prepares *kubeh* in a parallel storytelling device that makes Zuabi's analogical association of consumable flesh to human being unmistakable. The tale compels her to cross the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and finally the Syrian border as she searches for Ashraf, her Syrian lover and friend who, in turn, is also always searching for his friends and family that are either internally displaced in Syria or living in refugee settlements in Syria's border cities.

Design elements weave elegantly into the action of the play. A row of clear plastic bottles filled with variegated hues of cooking oil line the rear edge of the kitchen counter to create a liquid glow alternately suggestive of the play's many settings: a home kitchen, an

airport, an interrogation cell. A kitchen radio is an embedded sound source, but real theatre magic transpires when the story's rhythm and music emerge from Malouf's cooking. A powerful example of this occurs when she hires a cab to transport her between the Lebanese cities Akkar and Zahlé. The motor of the food processor that she uses to blend the 'skin' of the *kubeh* becomes the taxi's engine as she begins her circuitous path eastward, into Syria. This tale evokes the memory of another car trip taken as a child with her father, a Syrian immigrant established in Denver. The mechanical body of the food processor, while performing its function to blend bulgur and meat, doubles to traverse space and time and become vehicles that transport Malouf and the audience to the Syrian and Syrian-American men whom she loves.

The preparation of *kubeh* matches Malouf's emotional journey. Mistakes are built into the performance: she burns the onions as she gets lost in reminiscing about meeting Ashraf and the beginning of their affair, only to chop a second onion with greater intensity as she discovers the extent of his involvement with helping his friends escape. Ashraf inevitably disappears into Syria, and when Malouf begins her search for him in a refugee settlement in Akkar, she begins to chop meat in earnest. She performs snapshots of displaced Syrians that she meets as she looks for him -- women who have lost husbands and brothers, who have themselves survived injuries from bomb attacks. Her chopping intensifies, and when pauses to gather her work and ask, 'How fast do we become numb to pain?' one wonders if it's lamb flesh or Syria that she holds in her hands.

No one escapes Zuabi's neoliberal critique in this intimate setting. The New York audience cannot help but slip into the shoes of those represented in the play, while simultaneously realising our American complicity in the refugee crisis. Malouf, towards the end of the play, stands in the devastated Syrian city of Taffas. She gazes over the audience and sees not people, but 'long rows of charred watermelons,' that are, 'bleeding on the burned soil.' We, in Park Slope, see not watermelons, but versions of ourselves blended with

the wasted lives of hundreds of thousands of Syrian people. By the end of the play, the *kubeh* smells delicious, but eating is the last thing on anyone's mind; Malouf has finished her dish with a desperate flourish of lemon juice and presents it as an accompaniment to the final dramatic image of rows of children who perished in a sarin gas attack. The urgency of staging this play in the United States in the wake of Donald Trump's islamophobic travel bans is lost on no one seated in the small kitchen. The question remains as to how this play, and its message, might spread beyond an intimate group of empathetic audience participants to effect global humanitarian change at this, 'the end of the world.' Will we continue to consume the crimes against humanity that persist in Syria via the news and social media even as we stuff ourselves with its comfort foods? Or, will we risk everything to act for peace because we now know that we are also the crops rotting in Syria's burnt earth? In the words of Reem, Ashraf's young daughter, 'What happens to all will happen to us.'

Note: *The Play Company* is planning on touring *Oh My Sweet Land* to other US cities in the Spring and Summer of 2019, but the dates are still to be decided.