

The House

The House

by Tala Manassah & Mona Mansour *Arab Stages*,
Volume 1, Number 2 (Spring 2015) ©2015 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications

Lights come up on KAMAL, 60s, very intelligent, chubby, kind. He enters, sees a house, almost set off by itself. Almost doesn't look real. But it is.

KAMAL: I'm not sure what this is. A theater, or my house in Haifa.

Looks around.

As a physicist I try not to get too bogged down with limitations of time and space, but still. If I'm going to be in a theater, I'd rather be seeing *Mamma Mia*. That's just me. Anyway. My daughter and I do these plays. They're half plays and half real life. I enjoy them. Neither one of us is really what you would call a theater person.

ALIA, early 20s, his daughter, very intelligent, intense but sweet, enters the space.

ALIA: Baba.

KAMAL: Hi baby. I'm talking to the audience. One thing I learned from the last performance is that there is a very particular area you are meant to stand in if you want the most light. It's called the HOT SPOT. That's what the lighting man told me. The area around it, just centimeters from the center, is called THE SPILL.

ALIA: They know this already!

KAMAL: Not necessarily! We didn't. Then there's the gels. I like the gels. They are sheets of colored plastic that are set in front of a light; they change the way the colors mix and help cast a mood. I like that.

ALIA: What are you doing here?

KAMAL: I don't know where here is.

ALIA: Haifa. *(Suddenly not sure)* Right?

KAMAL: Maybe.

ALIA: Baba, it's Haifa. The stairways you had on the side of your house. Going up Mount Carmel.

KAMAL: You remember that? How do you remember that?

ALIA: It's not that hard. I listen.

KAMAL: One stairway was always crowded, for some reason, I don't know why. It was called "daraj al-anbiya."

ALIA: The Prophets' Stairs.

KAMAL: Hm.

They both look at this house, the stairs, and where they both seem to be.

KAMAL: So. It's a theater *or* the house in Haifa.

ALIA: Could it be both?

KAMAL: No.

ALIA: Why not?

KAMAL: It's simply impossible, since no one has yet invented a theory that convincingly argues that human beings can be in two places at once.

ALIA: Quantum Mechanics—

KAMAL: Yes. Talks about electrons. Or other elementary particles, being able to do that. But not people. Especially not chubby people.

ALIA (*To audience*): This has to be a play because it is impossible that my father is here. In Haifa. He doesn't come here. He won't! About twenty years ago he said, That's it. I can't go back.

KAMAL: Has it been twenty years? Whenever Oslo happened.

ALIA: Now that was theatre.

KAMAL: *Shi bi kharri, bad* theatre!

ALIA: Daddy. You never curse.

KAMAL: They deserve my curses! Oslo was a farce.

ALIA: Al harami be sa'ed al harami! (*One thief helps another thief!*)

KAMAL: Exactly! They built the airport in Gaza so Arafat could fly in and out, while everyone else was stuck in the world's largest open-air prison. I try not to get upset about these things because really, why

feel anger? Why feel anything? The Palestinians don't adapt to what they are presented with. We don't! Abba Eban was right: The Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity!

Rant over.

ALIA (*To audience*): So this is partly why he doesn't want to come here.

KAMAL: I'm not going to do this play.

ALIA: What?

KAMAL: I don't like myself in this play. This isn't the best version of myself. And I don't want to be here. At the family home in Haifa. It's a terrible play.

He steps off the stage, finds an empty seat in the audience.

KAMAL: Excuse me. May I? Could he move over one seat? Would that be possible? I don't want to inconvenience anyone. Thank you so much.

He sits down, settles in.

KAMAL: May I see your program? Hm. This looks interesting.

ALIA: What are you doing?

KAMAL: Quitting the play.

ALIA: I don't want to be up here by myself!

Uncomfortable, she fidgets. She opens her bag, pulls out a pack of cigarettes, lights up.

KAMAL: What are you doing?

ALIA: Baba, come on.

KAMAL: That is bad for you.

ALIA: I always smoke when I come to Palestine. Israel. Home. Here. Whatever it's called.

The smoke wafts toward him.

KAMAL: Cigarette smoke inside? Maybe we *are* in the Middle East. All right, let's go.

ALIA: So the play is over?

KAMAL: As far as I'm concerned, it never began. This is just a conversation between two people...

Looking around

...that happens to be in front of maybe one-hundred people.

ALIA: That's no good.

KAMAL: Well it's fitting. A play about a Palestinian man going to see the family home that was stolen from the family. Of course it has no middle and no end. Khallas.

ALIA: Hm. So we just walk away? That doesn't seem right.

KAMAL: I'll take you for a steak. The place you like.

He gets up, starts to leave.

ALIA: I can't. I can't leave.

KAMAL: Why? Why do you need to be here? I haven't lived in this house since I was three. It's bad memories, at the end.

ALIA: I want to know you.

KAMAL: I'm an open book. I'll tell you anything you want, my love.

ALIA: No. I feel like I can't fully know you until I go inside.

They both look at the house.

KAMAL: Well you can't.

She attacks his logic.

ALIA: I can't fully know you, or I can't go inside?

KAMAL: You can go inside, but you won't find me. It's like we were never here. The material world is malleable. Architecture carries no sentiment. It's like there's no trace of us anywhere.

ALIA: How do you know that?

KAMAL: I know! I look at the house, and I don't see my family!

ALIA: Your family? Your family is my family too.

KAMAL: Of course. Of course you're right, I didn't mean...

ALIA: Tell me what happened. You never want to talk about what happened.

KAMAL: I. It's uh. It's not even a special story. So many people have such stories. Just—

Beat. He looks at her then looks away. It's clear he can't go on.

ALIA: It's okay.

She puts her arm around him. They are quiet for a minute.

ALIA: I'm going inside. I have to go inside. And you have to wait for me.

Beat.

ALIA: Please. Sit with the audience. Wait for me.

She gets up. Takes a deep breath. Steps over the threshold. She goes into the house, and somehow, we see her inside the house, but he doesn't. Maybe we just hear her?

KAMAL: This is how I raised her to be. Determined. But sometimes you pay the price for it, you know? Between her, her sister, and my wife, I am the only private in an army with three Generals!

He nods. Beat as he waits, suspended.

ALIA: It's... it's big.

KAMAL: I know.

ALIA: It feels familiar, sort of. The ground floor is all open.

KAMAL: They originally stored grain there, during the Ottoman empire. When my grandfather was alive.

ALIA: Right. I remember.

KAMAL: Then later, when my father renovated, he wanted it to be a courtyard.

ALIA: I see it. Is this where you would ride your tricycle?

KAMAL: Yes. Yes, I would ride my tricycle there, and the sound of the wheels would echo against the stone walls. Such a funny sound. Teta Alia called it the magic tricycle. And she would smoke her argileh, and we'd look out and watch the ships go in and out of the port.

ALIA (*Calling out to him*): You sure you don't want to come inside?

KAMAL: No no. *You* look.

From another place in the house:

ALIA: Jiddo left the windows alone when he renovated. These are Ottoman, right?

KAMAL: Yes. Good girl.

ALIA: The arched doorways. He left those alone too. Wait. This tile above the window. Is there one extra on the—

KAMAL: Left-hand side.

ALIA: It's so strange. Why is it asymmetrical like that?

KAMAL: ...How are you able to see that right away?

ALIA: I don't know.

KAMAL: Most people never could tell those tiles were off. There are thirty-seven on the right—

ALIA: And thirty-eight on the left, I know.

She comes back outside.

KAMAL: Why do you know that?

ALIA: My eyes went right to it. The imperfection.

KAMAL: Your grandmother hated it.

ALIA: I don't mind it so much.

Moved, she sits next to him.

ALIA: Somehow, I know this place.

KAMAL (*uses her nickname*): 'Aloush.

ALIA: I love the idea of a little *you* riding the tricycle inside this big house.

Beat.

ALIA: Maybe there's something in my DNA. That these forms are somehow familiar to me. How many generations of us lived here?

Beat. They both consider.

KAMAL: Well. No more.

ALIA: I think I know why you can't go inside. Baba. We can go now.

He looks at the house, again.

KAMAL: I'm always in two places at once.

And now he looks out at the theatre. He raises a hand to play with the spill of light.

ALIA: Me too.

She takes his hand.

END PLAY

Tala Jamal Manassah is deputy executive director of Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility, the national leader in school-based social and emotional learning programs. As a playwright, she has co-written, with Mona Mansour, *The House*, *Noor Theater* and the *American Institute for Architecture*; *The Letter*, *Golden Thread/ReOrient Festival*; *After*, *CUNY/Queens College*; and *Dressing*, part of *Facing Our Truths: Short Plays about Trayvon, Race and Privilege*. *Manassah and Mansour* were awarded a residency at *Berkeley Rep's Ground Floor* in 2013 to develop a musical play called *The Wife*. Most recently, they were given an *Ensemble Studio Theatre/Sloan* commission to write a play about 1970s Iraq. *Manassah* received her A.B. (honors) in philosophy and A.M. in the humanities at the *University of Chicago*.

Mona Mansour's *The Way West* had its world premiere in spring 2014 at *Steppenwolf*, directed by *Amy Morton*. The play received the 2013 *Sky Cooper New American Play Prize* from *Marin Theatre Company*, where it will get its West Coast premiere in 2015. *The Hour of Feeling* (Directed by *Mark Wing-Davey*) premiered at the 2012 *Humana Festival*, then was part of the *High Tide Festival* in the U.K. *Urge for Going* received a *LAB* production in 2011 at the *Public Theater*, and had its West Coast premiere at *Golden Thread* (directed by *Evren Odcikin*). *The Vagrant*, the third play in the trilogy, was work-shopped at the 2013 *Sundance Theater Institute*. *Mona* was a member of the *Public Theater's Emerging Writers Group* and is part of *New Dramatists*. With *Tala Manassah* she has written *The House*, *After*, and *The Letter*, and *Dressing*, part of *Facing Our Truths: Short Plays about Trayvon, Race and Privilege*; they have an *EST/Sloan* commission to write a play about 1970s Iraq. She has won the 2012 *Whiting Award* and the 2014 *Middle East America Distinguished Playwright Award*. monamansour.com



MARTIN E. SEGAL THEATRE CENTER
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Arab Stages

Volume 1, Number 2 (Spring 2015)

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