

## Arab Angst on Swedish Stages

Arab Angst on Swedish Stages *I Came to See You*

by  
Karim Rashid  
Directed by  
Robert Jelinek and Petra Brylander  
A Theatre Review by Margaret Litvin

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On its face, Karim Rashed's "I Came to See You" (??? ?????), staged this season in Malmö and Stockholm, Sweden, is about the immigrant's identity crisis, his inability to feel at home in the new land and his deluded nostalgia for the old. On the meta level, however, everything about the play's creation, staging, and reception testifies to just the opposite. Iraqi theatre is alive in Sweden, forming a vibrant part of the Swedish theatre scene as well as the transnational Arab cultural landscape.

### Sightseeing in Hell

Structured as a dream play (as in Strindberg's *Dream Play*, where "anything can happen; everything is possible and probable; ... imagination spins and waves new patterns made up of memories, experiences, unfettered fantasies, absurdities, and improvizations"), *I Came to See You* pivots on a fantasy of return. After twenty years building a secure life in the "snow heaven" (??? ?????) of Sweden – blonde wife, soccer-playing children, job, house, Mercedes – an Iraqi exile named Salim (in an affectingly vulnerable performance by Miran Kamala) returns to visit war-torn contemporary Baghdad. "I have nothing here," Salim tells his understandably offended wife Ester (Anette Lindbäck) in Malmö. He picks up his suitcase full of business shirts and departs. It is a symbolic descent to hell, and even the names are allegorical: in Baghdad Salim ("The Safe One") meets his best friend Mokhlis ("The Loyal"), a photographer who stayed in Iraq documenting Saddam Hussein's dictatorship and the US occupation and civil war that followed; later Salim dreams a conversation with Roaa ("Vision"), his former girlfriend whom he abandoned to flee to the West.

Is Salim a disaster tourist or a delusional would-be returnee? As Mokhlis, Roaa, and the soldiers who stop him during the overnight curfew question his motives, Salim offers only the play's title line: "I came to see you."<sup>[1]</sup> But the predictable irony is that Salim fails to "see" Baghdad in any sense. His map is outdated, his favorite bridges gone, his parents' graves impossible to find. He is surprised at the darkness during a power cut. He cannot stand to look long either at Mokhlis' photos or at his friend's face, hideously injured in a recent suicide bombing. In his youth, we learn, Salim had stared up for hours hoping for a glimpse of his beloved Roaa – only to learn he had been stalking the wrong window. And for reasons revealed at the end of the play, he can now see Roaa only in a hallucinatory sequence described

as a “dream-within-a-dream.”



Helen Al-Janabi as Roaa in "I Came to See You", directed by Karim Rashed.

Instead, the confused Salim is the one seen and seen through by every other character in the play: from his wife’s bitter inquisition in the opening scene to a strip search by the soldiers in the last. The Malmö and Stockholm production highlighted this theme of sight (from self-knowledge to surveillance) through a pair of enormous eyes at the center of Carolyn Romare’s brilliantly simple set, a wall evoking centuries of history from Assyrian friezes to concrete-and-rebar security barriers to Islamist posters and graffiti; Ulrik Gad’s effective lighting foregrounded these elements in turn.

The dreamlike use of character doubling further reinforced the vision/blindness theme, as the three interrogating soldiers played by Lindbäck, Rashed, and al-Janabi retained traits of Mokhlis and the two homeland-as-woman candidates, Ester and Roaa. (First imposed by thrift at the Malmö City Theatre, this doubling turned into a powerful dramatic element.)

### **A Traveling Text**

Yet even as the script showed Salim’s repeated failures to understand and belong, the production enacted

the opposite. Thanks to both the writing and the sensitive direction (by Malmö City Theatre Artistic Director Petra Brylander, co-director Robert Jelinek, and Iraqi-Swedish assistant director Ayad Hamid), *I Came to See You* looked over Salim's head to wink happily at its Arab, Swedish, and Arabic-speaking-Swedish audiences. (Some members of the latter group reported weeping all the way through the show.)

Rashed first wrote *I Came to See You* in Arabic, winning a [playwriting prize from the Sharjah-based Arab Theatre Authority](#) in 2011. Malmö City Theatre and the national Riksteatern then picked it up for a co-production, prompting Rashed to rewrite it in Swedish. ("It made me happy that it happened in this order, for the play to be recognized in the Arab world first and then, as a result of that, in Sweden, rather than vice-versa as usually happens," he told me.) A Strindberg fan since his Baghdad theatre school days, he kept the classical structure, a series of tight two-character dialogues modeled on European drama. But he tweaked some of the characters, gave names and offstage speaking parts to Salim's children Miriam and Jacob, and expanded some comic elements for the Swedish audience, such as a lengthy telemarketing pitch for a Complete Safety insurance plan. These were well appreciated on the night I saw the show.

Heavy cuts brought the total running time well under an hour. "They're different audiences, with different codes," Rashed said. "The Swedish audience is a cooperative audience – they want to work with you [to make sense of the play]. You don't have to spell everything out for them. In the Arab world, the whole text would be staged, but here, where theatre is a part of the mainstream culture and not just an elite phenomenon, you only need two-thirds of it. They can fill in the blanks. And the poetry of the dramatic language has a less important role in Swedish than in Arabic theatre."

The ending also changed. The original draft's Salim (albeit possibly dreaming) finally commits to Baghdad: fatally shot by American soldiers who have mistaken him for a suicide bomber, he declares, "I've come to stay." The Swedish show, flattering a different audience, lacked such closure. The ending (which struck [Swedish critic Boel Gerell](#) as too abrupt) left Salim undecided; there was no shooting, only a phone message from his daughter Miriam pulling him home to Sweden.

## Language Games

Language games, acting like a third rail, provided an unexpected source of energy. In Swedish the fuSHa/3ammiyya divide disappeared, rendering the script sharper and more idiomatic than the slightly stilted original, with stronger profanities and more realistic daily vocabulary. Best of all, at several moments of greatest emotional intensity, the Arab characters broke into Arabic – not only decorative exclamations like *khalas* and *habibi* and keywords like *kha'in* (traitor), which even Ester used, but long stretches of meaningful monologue or dialogue left untranslated for non-Arabic-speaking members of the audience.

For instance, in a dream-within-a-dream sequence midway through the play, he saw an apparition of his former girlfriend Roaa (the radiant and tough Helen al-Janabi). Their dialogue began, in untranslated Arabic that pierced the play like a dagger straight to the heart:

Salim: Roaa... Habibti.

Roaa: Akhiran. Qull-ha marra thaniya. 'Ashrin sannatan wa-hadhihi al-alimat tarunnu fi udhunni.

Salim: Uhibbuki. Uhibbuki da’iman. Kulli mishtaq laki. Madha aquul kayy tusadaqini wa-tu’adhirini?

Roaa: Qabbilni.

????: ???.. ??????.

???: ?????.. ??? ????.. ????? ???? ?????? ???? ? ????.

????: ?????.. ?????? ?????.. ??? ????? ??. ??? ???? ? ? ?????? ?????????

??? : ?????.

Only after they kissed did their dialogue move back into Swedish, as Roaa bitterly reproached Salim both for his betrayal and for his return:

Welcome here, then. This is a country full of graveyards. The mosques are graveyards, the churches are graveyards, and the markets and the rivers and the bridges. Wherever you turn you find graves. Throw yourself anywhere and you’ll find yourself in a grave. Go away. Leave me to my sorrows. My heart is no grave. (author's translation)

In an irony he relished, the Baghdad-trained, Malmö-based Rashed was cast as Mokhlis: not the insecure exile, but the embittered friend who stayed in Iraq. He played Mokhlis as a seething bundle of finely calibrated rage. “I didn’t want to play Salim, because his character is close to my own,” he said. “Often people are interested in Arabic theatre because they expect tragic true stories. We’re here to make art, not to tell our stories.” But even while refusing to do ethnography, the play called for verisimilitude in its casting. Fortunately, Sweden’s mature theatre community offers polyglot performers at the level of Kamala (an Iraqi Kurdish actor originally from Sulaymaniyah, he has lived in Sweden since 1989 and trained in theatre and film in Gothenburg) and al-Janabi (a Syrian actress who graduated from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus in 2005 and has been active in Swedish theatre since 2009). Besides their ability to switch fluently and convincingly between Swedish and Arabic, the three showed remarkable chemistry. Only Lindbäck’s acting at times appeared wooden, even declamatory, as though forcing the audience to see Ester through Salim’s jaded eyes.

That a mainstream theatre could pull off this code-switching and not alienate audiences says as much about Sweden’s offstage realities as about the artistic vision of Rashed, Brylander, and Jelinek. “In Malmö we have many immigrants from different places,” Brylander told me, with some understatement. ([About 40 percent](#) of Malmö residents were either born abroad or born in Sweden to foreign-born parents. Besides large Assyrian, Arab, and Kurdish communities, Sweden has welcomed waves of refugees from Finland, Chile, former Yugoslavia, and elsewhere.) “Everyone knows a few words of Arabic or is used to hearing Arabic spoken in school or on the street, even if they don’t understand it. Everyone – even within Sweden – everyone has a migration story.” In the reunion scene between Roaa and Salim, Brylander added, the acting can compensate for the audience’s language gap. At the Stockholm performance I saw, this was true: there was no surtitle translation, no glossary, and no one seemed to miss it.

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## Footnotes

[1] In Swedish, the title line translates as the idiomatic but slightly different “Jag kom för att träffa dig,” “I came to meet you.” Perhaps this helps explain why the Swedish-and-Arabic play was presented with an English title, keeping the emphasis on seeing and vision. Otherwise the dialogue contained no English words except the now globalized “checkpoint” and “Fuck you.”

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