

The Mysteries Behind a Silenced Voice: Review of Betty Shamieh's *The Strangest*



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By Juan R. Recondo

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Semitic Root's production of Betty Shamieh's *The Strangest*, directed by May Adrales and which ran from March 11 to April 1 at the Fourth Street Theatre, explores the life of the unnamed Arab man murdered by Meursault, the French Algerian protagonist of Albert Camus's *The Stranger*. The action of both the novel and the play is set in Algeria during the early 1940s when the North African nation was still a French colony. Camus's novel narrates the final days of Meursault's life through a first-person point of view. The readers witness how the character experiences his mother's death, his attitudes towards work, his love life, his relationships with his neighbors, and his court case through Meursault's

own voice. By solely focusing on the voice of a Pied-Noir (a European who immigrated to Algeria while it was still part of France) who directly interacts with other European descendants, Camus's novel compresses the Algerian characters to the silence of the colonized masses. Shamieh's play expands onto the lives of the young Arab man and his loved ones to not only emphasize the injustices of a colonial regime, but also shed light on how these relations of power impact a family that has suffered from colonial oppression ever since the French arrived in Algeria in the nineteenth century.



Alok Tewari as Abu. Photo: Hunter Canning

Shamieh structured *The Strangest* as a murder mystery where one of three brothers will be shot at the end. Their mother, Umm (Jacqueline Antaramian), tells the story that will end in the murder of one of her sons: Nemo (Andrew Guilarte), an aggressive and volatile young man who spends most of his time getting into trouble and accompanied by prostitutes; Nouno (Louis Sallan), the shoemaker who is somewhat slow and extremely submissive; and Nader (Juri Henly-Cohn), the sensitive and passionate artist. The three brothers are attracted to their cousin, Layali (Roxanna Hope Radja), who was raised by Umm and her husband, Abu (Alok Tewari), the young woman's uncle. The beautiful Layali is willing to do anything to acquire financial stability. For this reason, she rejects her own feelings towards her cousin Nader, who is passionately in love with her, and decides to do anything she can to acquire French citizenship.



Roxanna Hope Radja and Juri Henly-Cohn. Photo: Hunter Canning

Although Layali is fiercely independent and proud, she starts dating an unnamed French man and hopes that one day she will settle down in France. The French man's name never comes up in Shamieh's play, but we could assume that he is Raymond Sintès, Meursault's neighbor in Camus's novel. In the novel, he is seeing an unnamed young Algerian woman (Layali in Shamieh's play) whom he has abused and plans to humiliate since she was unfaithful to him. Yet the woman in the novel remains a non-entity whom Camus only uses as a literary device to reveal Sintès's complex personality and move the action to its climax. Shamieh builds on Camus's work to illustrate how Layali sacrifices her real happiness to be French. While Shamieh fully explores the tragic proportions of the Algerian character's story, she compresses Sintès to silence just as Camus does to the Arab characters. Gun (Brendan Titley), as he is referred in the program, is performed as a human revolver who wears a huge headpiece of a gun barrel and onomatopoeically expresses himself by only uttering the sound "bang." The character is somewhat reminiscent of Capitano from *commedia dell'arte* tradition since he clownishly dons a colonial military uniform. Furthermore, he is the butt of the joke, especially since Layali's cousins are unable to decipher what he says through his persistent "bangs." Yet at one point, the character reveals his dark side when Layali discovers that he will never take her to France. In response to Layali's anger, Gun beats and rapes her. In the novel, the Arab woman's "brother" tries to avenge his sister's rape but is shot by Meursault. Although in the play we do not see the shooting, we witness the impact that the crime has on Umm, the victim's mother.



Entertaining the European. Photo: Hunter Canning

Shamieh not only mitigates the colonial deletion of native voices in Camus's novel, but also challenges the general silencing of women in Algerian culture. In the play, Abu, the father of the young man who is shot, was known as a powerful storyteller. A great moment in the play is when Abu wins the hand of his future wife, Umm, by defeating her father in a storytelling contest. Abu tells the well-known story of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, but gives it a new spin by giving each of the thieves a French name, a detail that impresses the crowd. Sadly, the character's talent is limited to the past since during the action of the play, he is a broken man who can barely walk and who has lost his voice due to the colonial atrocities that he has witnessed. Alok Tewari's performance as Abu wonderfully reflects the character's power as a storyteller in the past and makes us feel his terrible downfall. Nevertheless, the most powerful voice in Shamieh's work is Umm, Abu's wife. The play's main plot is her story. Umm enters the male-dominated space of an Algerian coffeehouse to show her ability as a storyteller. Jacqueline Antaramian's energetic narration and the emotional impact that the story has on her character make her voice the preeminent one. In this way, Shamieh counteracts the androcentric world in both Camus's novel and Algerian society.

Daniel Zimmerman's scenic design transports the audience to an Algerian coffeehouse, where spectators comfortably sit on benches or cushions on the floor placed around the stage. Zimmerman creates the perfect oneiric environment for Umm to tell her story and for her characters to come to life for us. Aaron Porter's faint lighting design adds to the ambiance, nevertheless, the lights shift every time the other

characters' voices appear. May Adrales's direction effectively balances the epic proportions of colonialism's impact on a family with the subtleties of Umm's intimate story about the loss of her son. The play humanizes the shadows of the Arab women and men who are victimized in Camus's novel. It is Umm's story what truly lets us see the horror of French colonialism and the cruelty of Camus's characters.

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