

Yussef El Guindi's *Hostages*: Thirty Years Later and Still Frighteningly Relevant



Hostages at 18th & Union. Courtesy: David Gassner.

“You cheer your team when they score a goal, yes? You wave the flag, you cheer your troops ... And after you cheer you switch off the TV and forget. You forget what has been done. For you. In your name.”^[1]

???

Yussef El Guindi's play *Hostages* was written in 1988 while the playwright was an artist-in-residence at Duke University. The play premiered at Duke, went on to play at Primary Stages in New York for a short run, and has been revived several times since its premiere. The latest revival of the play took place at the 18th & Union, an Arts Space in Seattle, co-produced with Radial Theater Project. The play was directed by David Gassner, starring Nik Doner as Meadows, Sam Hagen as Ted, and Yusef Mahmoud as The Guard.

One can assume that the play originally took place in Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1991), but there is no reference to any specific conflict in the script. The play opens in a sparse room with two blindfolded hostages chained to a radiator. The 18th & Union space, which is a large rectangular room with audience seating on one end and a brick wall running the length of house right, proved a perfect space for the play. The two hostages, both faculty members at an unnamed Middle Eastern university, are opposites in their politics, their world views, and their reasons for wanting to teach at a foreign institution. The men start off desperately needing one another for companionship, even going so far as to begging to have contact with each other's bodies for some indication that they were still physically present and not just figments of each other's imaginations. Gradually, the differences between the men become starkly apparent with Meadows' hatred and disgust with his captors, and with the entire society in general becomes more and more pronounced. Ted, on the other hand, seems to bear his misfortune with more fortitude and understanding about why their captivity has more to do with the complexities of the geopolitical situation than with anything personal.

MEADOWS. Have you ever noticed how polite they are. Always saying “sorry.” As if they couldn't help themselves. As if they had an uncontrollable fetish for abducting foreigners.

TED. I wouldn't call it a fetish.

MEADOWS. Nothing to do with politics. Nothing whatsoever to do with that. You can't say this is a politically motivated compulsion. It's got something a lot seamier than politics. It's got to do with blood, Ted. Race.

TED. Stop.

MEADOWS. National character. It's genetic. A belief system so ingrained it's passed down through the genes.^[2]

El Guindi's pairing of these two men: one who represents the xenophobic, Islamophobic Westerner who has little or no sympathy with those he benefits from; and the other, a Westerner who is in a similar situation but refuses to believe that all people are inherently and genetically evil, creates the dialectic that drives the play. Ted goes so far as to wonder if Meadows would strap himself to explosives for any reason, questioning what it would feel like to be so committed and dedicated to a cause. Meadows mocks Ted for being an advocate for oppressed people and for being “Held hostage by the people he once

championed.”^[3] Meadows excoriates Ted for being a person who attempts to empathize with people being oppressed by his own government only to find himself having to face the cruel reality that he, too, would be held hostage despite his beliefs. Ted responds forcefully:

TED. This war, the people I was supposedly trying to help, did not emerge full blown from either of our heads. We are not – we are barely bit players in their struggle. What’s happened to us takes nothing away from the real grievances they still have. Their struggle remains a just one, even if we’re now counted among its casualties; or because a gang of... (He’s about to say “thugs”.) idiots among them thought they could change things by abducting us. My only regret is that now *we’ve* become part of the problem.^[4]

The fact that Meadows reveals that he came to the country not out of any political or educational solidarity, but because he wanted an adulterous affair, further alienates him in the audience’s eyes. El Guindi returns to this form of American adventurism in his 2014 play *Threesome* when the character of Doug, an embedded photographer with US Troops during the Gulf War, admits he had sex with a destitute Arab woman. This notion of Westerners turning to the Middle East to live out their sexual fantasies has been alluded to by many scholars ranging from Edward W. Said to Malek Alloula. In his article “Vacation Cruises; or, The Homoerotics of Orientalism,” Joseph A. Boone writes,

For many Western men the act of exploring, writing about, and theorizing an eroticized Near East is coterminous with unlocking a Pandora’s box of phantasmic homoerotic desire, desire whose propensity to spread without check threatens to contaminate if not to re-orient, the heterosexual “essence” of occidental male subjectivity.^[5]

In this way, Meadows becomes yet another Occidental male searching for his erotic pleasure in Middle Eastern lands. For Ted, however, the desire to teach in this place seems rooted in both a solidarity with the people, and with a desire to understand his role as a Westerner in the conflict.

The reality of the situation of the war outside, and the strife between the men, continues to grow throughout the play. While Ted attempts to get Meadows to think of the suffering of those suffering and dying “under *our* bombs,” Meadows continues to wallow in self-pity and hatred for his captors. The surprise appearance of the Guard, who is most definitely Middle Eastern and one of the captors, introduces yet another complication into Ted and Meadows’ relationship. The Guard, who has suffered the death of his own sister from the bombings taking place outside, feels little sympathy for the two men and their desire for “fair play.” When Ted asks the Guard for a drink, he returns not with a scotch, but with a cup of his own urine. When Meadows pleads with the Guard to spare them the indignity of drinking the urine, and claims “We don’t give orders or push buttons, we don’t drop bombs. We have nothing to do with this!” the Guard responds, “You cheer your team when they score a goal, yes? You wave the flag, you cheer your troops ... And after you cheer you switch off the TV and forget. You forget what has been done. For you. In your name.”^[6] Ted takes the drink and swallows it, telling the man, “To the memory of your sister.”^[7] The final scene, one where the men are forced to choose between two straws to decide who will live and who will die, becomes the penultimate moment for the men. Although the dialogue ends with a joke, the final stage direction, “The sound of a gun firing once,” gives the audience the cruel implication that at least one of the men will not make it out alive.

Gassner directed his actors very well, and the ethos of fear and terror he created onstage was palpable. It was clear that Doner and Hagen were completely committed to their roles, with each scene taking us

deeper and deeper into the conflict between the men in a visceral and terrifying way. The two actors played brilliantly off of one another and found a great balance between the play's humor and its pathos. Angelo Dometri's lighting design, Amy LaZerte's props, and Evan Mosher's sound design all faithfully captured the dystopian world of the play.

Although Yusef Mahmoud was solid in his portrayal of the Guard, it was unfortunate that his character was given such short shrift by this production. It might have helped if Julia Evanovich's costume design (which was excellent for the other characters) had given him a rougher look than the nicely pressed urban hip outfit he wore. For someone who is a fighter and a captor, the Guard costume seemed too removed from the day-to-day conflict referred to in the play. Also, if the Guard had been to the site of his sister's death, surely he would not have come away looking so tidy and neat. In other words, it was difficult to believe this character was not only living in a war zone but participating in that war directly. This design choice gets to a deeper problem in this production: if the play is really about those in wars who are deeply affected by the foreign policies of others, it would have been a stronger choice to deepen the Guard's character. Although the character's anger was clear, I missed the underlying grief and pain that fueled that anger. Given that El Guindi writes primarily about the Arab/Muslim experience, I found it most unfortunate that the only Arab/Muslim character in the play was the least dimensional. If the production is restaged, it would behoove director David Gassner to spend more time deepening this character and attempting to discover the manifold reasons that would drive a person to treat hostages in this way.

What can a play like *Hostages* tell us now, thirty years from its world premiere? At a time when ISIL continues to take hostages and murder them with terrible frequency, the Syrian Civil War now in its seventh year, greater chaos and warfare engulfing states like Yemen, Libya, and other ongoing struggles like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it seems that El Guindi's play remains frighteningly relevant. With the proliferation and use of U.S. arms in more Middle Eastern wars, Ted's words about our obligation as Westerners to take responsibility for our involvement in these conflicts ring truer than ever. Unfortunately, it seems, there are some things that never change.

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[1] Yussef El Guindi, *Hostages*. Unpublished play script.

[2] Ibid. 15-16.

[3] Ibid 30.

[4] Ibid 33.

[5] Boone, Joseph A. "Vacation Cruises; Or, the Homoerotics of Orientalism," in *PMLA*, Vol. 110, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), p. 93.

[6] Ibid 65.

[7] Ibid 66.



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