Here’s Looking at You, Habibi

A Monodrama by Philip Himberg

> **"If we stop breathing, we'll die. If we stop fighting our enemies, the world will die."**
>
> *– "Victor Lazlo" (Casablanca)*

An Airport Lounge. Maybe a trio of empty seats.
House Lights are Up
SOUND: As Time Goes By – Recording by Barbra Streisand
(from The Third Album)

[Recording]:

"You must remember this,
a kiss is still a kiss,
a sigh is still a sigh.
The fundamental things apply, as time goes by."

House Lights and Pre-Set Lights fade
MALE NARRATOR, 60 something, enters, listening to music
He sits, drops his Knapsack or Carry-On Bag
Removes a water bottle, sips, listens to the song

"*And when two lovers woo,*
they still say, "I love you".
On that you can rely.
No matter what the future brings As time goes by."

He sings along, with spirit

"*Moonlight and love songs*
Never out of date
Hearts full of passion
Jealousy and hate
Woman needs man, and man must have his mate
That no one can deny…"

Recording fades out…

NARRATOR:

(Acknowledging the song) I bet I know. I bet I know what you're thinking. (points to himself) He's a bit of a cliché. Yes, for sure. I am an out gay American of "a certain age", and not alone in my obsession with Barbra Streisand. (he sings): You must remember this, a kiss is still a kiss… Now that particular song, which Streisand recorded in 1964 when she was twenty- two years old, is also associated with a very famous film. I imagine many of you know this.

I also wish to confess to an obsession with classic Hollywood movies. I have watched many of them dozens and dozens of times. Especially the ones from the 1940's and 50's. Those films that tell stories of impossible romance, often against the backdrop of war. Stories with impossibly handsome heroes with chiseled chins. And evil con men, with glistening slicked-back hair – and chiseled chins. And wise-cracking women wearing bright red lipstick that leaves its mark on the rims of martini glasses, femme fatales, damsels in distress who – in the end – can damn well take care of themselves.

And so… I ask you now to imagine another cast of characters. A sinewy Iraqi dancer with a sexy smile, jet black eyes, a few days' worth of beard, shaggy hair. Exiled from his homeland, he lives without formal identity papers, in Antwerp.

Standing beside him, a cigarette perched on her lips, a Palestinian solo performer. Her face is like a valentine. She looks a bit like Rita Hayworth as "Gilda", thick honey hair. She is well-known, the daughter of a famous PLO revolutionary and in her writing, shares family secrets as well as stories of her life as the press secretary to a PLO commander.

Nearby, a young Syrian playwright balances first on one leg and then the other. I think maybe he needs to pee, or perhaps he is just nervous. His hair curls unpredictably, and he exudes both a warmth and a melancholy that somehow tear at my heart. I can see the little boy in his not quite thirty-year-old face. I decide he is by far the wisest of us all. He, who having fled Damascus, now dedicates his life in Beirut to uplifting the voices of his artist countrymen. He calls me "Habibi".

Improbably, I complete this quartet – an aging queer American Jew, once lanky, now – not so much. I have what are sweetly called "love handles". My own history cannot compete with those of my comrades, though right now, we all share one thing. We are far from our homes.

It is 2016. Our little foursome stands in the shade of row upon row of Date Palms on the Boulevard Oued Issil, a few yards from the entrance of the Prefecture de Police in downtown Marrakech on a hot May afternoon. We are very early to our appointment with the Marrakech chief of Police, and the guard at the entrance has instructed us to wait outside and waves us off until our interview hour.

In my mind and only in my mind, I am on assignment, like *Humphrey Bogart* in Casablanca. A black and white Hollywood movie made in 1942. My mission? To procure a one-week extension

of valuable visas for these three shimmering humans who I hope are now becoming my friends. I wonder if *Police Captain Louis Renault*, played by *Claude Rains*, waits for us inside Headquarters. I hope so. Claude Rains is not exactly a leading man, but as Louis Renault in the movie, he has undeniable charm and savoir faire, and in two hours of screen time, he transforms from a cynical profiteer to a man of real conscience. He alone holds the power to save us.

Along with another thirteen artists from what we Americans call "the Arab world", and sixteen artists from the United States, my three companions are here at the invitation of a respected American play development program, of which I am director, for a three-week artist residency in Morocco. An opportunity to create their new plays and performances in an international community.

The full contingent of Arab artist participants in our theatre workshop represent six different Levantine and North African countries. Securing all the Visas for them to enter Morocco was, we were told, relatively unattainable in cultural circles. Still, the Minister's office had promised and then virtually succeeded to make good. Here we were outside the Police department, primed to seal the deal – the three final one-week visa extensions – for this Syrian, this Iraqi, this Palestinian. We are attempting to set right what should have been made proper weeks before. The stakes, for us, are high.

I had landed in North Africa a few weeks before everyone else, to make final preparations for this residency. One afternoon, still jet lagged, I found myself sitting on a random slab of concrete in a dusty parking lot in the Medina of Marrakech, cell phone plastered to my ear, pleading with a representative of the Moroccan King's office to complete their promise of three-week visa papers for all sixteen Arabic language theatre makers. Trying with every fiber of my being not to look or sound like an American, "You gotta be kidding me! Theatre is… *theatre*! Rehearsals are live and in-person. We're not making a movie here. Every artist works together, collaboratively, every day. So, no one can pick up and leave early. That is why we specifically asked for *three-week visas for everyone*. For these three individuals, you only provided two-week visas and that simply will not work."

The voice at my ear: "I assure you we are doing our best. Palestine, Syria, Iraq" – he said those words like bitter fruits. "These are not so simple."

(shaking his head? a loud sigh?). "I don't think you understand." I tried to imagine what would make my case. "It's like your Parliament. You can't pass laws without enough ministers in session, am I right? I mean, the MPs cannot just walk out in the middle of their assembly. How would the country run? To approve visas for some for only two weeks, when the entire company needs to be together for the duration doesn't make sense. I am sure you understand. You must see plays."

I don't know what I expected of this poor man. That perhaps he would have a sudden vision in his head of the balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet – prematurely and tragically interrupted?

VOICE-OVER OF "JULIET":

"O, swear not by the moon, th' inconstant
Moon,
That monthly changes in her circle orb,
Lest that they love prove likewise variable."

NARRATOR (as Romeo):

"What shall I swear by?"
(Pause, as sound of a door slam. Still waiting for Juliet to speak)
"What shall I swear by?"

(Looks around, dropping the character) Juliet? Hey Juliet! "Wherefore art thou?"

(To us): Apparently, Juliet is off sipping champagne on some Royal Air Maroc flight headed to Tripoli because her visa expired.

"You must have patience," said the voice on the end of the line.

"If we stop breathing, we'll die. If we stop fighting our enemies, the world will die." That I also did not say. That's a line spoken by the dreamy actor Paul Henried whose character *Victor Lazlo*, leader of the European "resistance" has recently escaped from a Nazi concentration camp. The Germans are hunting him across the globe, and he has landed in Morocco, hoping against hope for a visa to Lisbon and from there, on to America.

Of course, before I go any further with this uneasy metaphor, let me make one thing perfectly clear. The film "Casablanca" was not shot anywhere near Morocco, or even North Africa. It was filmed entirely on a backlot in Hollywood, California. The famous final airport scene, where our hero and heroine escape, was in real life, the tiny suburban Van Nuys Airport in the San Fernando Valley. And while *Victor Lazlo* was fighting for the survival of the free world, we here in Marrakech in 2016 we were all simply making up stories.

To be completely truthful, I was not speaking to a bureaucrat at all. I was speaking to the King's Minister, a powerful and exceptionally kind statesman who had thus far created miracles – assuring three week Visas for the vast majority of our theatre makers from across the Middle East and North Africa. "We are so grateful for all you've done," I said, "but it's simply not enough. Theatre is powerful. It can change the world, you know. That's why dictators always try to censor us." (realizing his faux pas) "I'm not saying you are. No, that is not want I am saying. Sorry."

I cringed. I was being a total asshole. This man had way more important issues to contend with. His country's economy. The threat of terrorism. National strikes. The Western Sahara conflict, for god's sake. I must have sounded exactly like what I most hated – a privileged westerner

trumpeting his way in a world where many others before me had also pushed the limits.

Before I visited this part of the world, my well-meaning friends back home in New York gave me three pieces of stern advice. “Don’t argue with anyone. Don’t tell anyone you are a Jew. And for god’s sake, never tell anyone you are gay.”

To a cab driver in Casablanca a few months earlier, on a research trip: “*Y a-t-il des synagogues par ici*?” Immediately the cabbie jerked the car over to the curb, idled the engine, and turned to me. “You know,” he said, his finger jabbing in my direction, “our King’s Minister is a Jew. He was advisor to “Hassan Deux” the King’s father as well.” He lowered his voice: “The Jews, you know, they are very good with money.” Then he put the car into gear, made a screeching U-turn, gunned the engine down the Boulevard, and eventually parked. “This is the neighborhood of Dar El Beida. Soon I will show you many things.”

Suddenly, he was not a driver, but my tour guide, greeting locals and letting it be known that his passenger was a gentleman of the Jewish faith from New York City. One kind-eyed woman looked at me hopefully. “Perhaps – you know my cousin – in Brooklyn? A beautiful girl.” Another said “My son he owns a bakery on Long Island. Maybe you go there?”

The cabbie insisted we visit the “Kaysher” place. I had no idea what he was talking about. Turns out that the Kaysher place was a Kosher butcher where much to the chagrin of the proprietor I was forced to confess that I didn’t keep “Kaysher”. Like a knife in the poor man’s heart. I was tempted to tell him that my Pakistani Shia husband, back home, did keep Halal, but decided against divulging that. Even so, the butcher got the caretaker of the oldest synagogue to unlock the doors and let me peer in at all the red velvet and gold lamps. A world whose inhabitants pretty much vanished around 1956, when a young Israel beckoned this Moroccan community to move, and many did and left behind their comfortable homes and long-time friends to brave a strange state in a then arid land which turned out to be not always welcoming to these non-European Sephardim.

I wipe sweat from my upper lip. I ask my friends: “Should we check with the guard? Maybe he forgot about us.” They shake their heads ‘no’. I drink water from my ubiquitous water bottle, which is on a cord around my neck, which of course immediately brands me a foolish tourist. Luckily, the palms provide us much-needed shade from the glare of the North African sun.

All at once, Amar from Bagdad is dancing beneath the trees, like Gene Kelly in “Singin’ in the Rain,” though it’s more like dancing in the dust. He’s improvising a sort of cartoon of modern dance, mixed with sweet little ballet leaps and even hip hop. One foot on, the other off the curb. I smile. Amar hurdles over a fire hydrant.

“Stop it, Amar. This will not help us.” Raeda’s scolding surprises me. As far as I am concerned, Amar could get away with anything and I could certainly watch him all day. He poses seductively, picks up two fallen dusty palm fronds, and holds them to his ears – like the headdress of a Folies

Berger chorus girl. I clap and laugh. “No!” Raeda looks at me with daggers. “Do not encourage him, Philip.” She turns to him. “You know better, Amar. We have been here before.” Immediately he drops his pose, as well as the giant curled brown leaves he holds, and looks down. Suddenly he is a schoolboy, clearly humiliated in front of me. I wonder what she means by “we have been here before.”

Amar lights a cigarette, probably his thirtieth of the day, and walks some distance. Raeda smokes too. Abdullah comes to me and smiles. “It’s okay, Habibi”. I look at my watch.

After a time, Amar wanders back. I ask him for a cigarette as bumming cigarettes from actors who can’t afford them was something I had begun to do too frequently in North Africa. “I will buy you a new pack,” I promise. And I mean it. He waves me off, lights two in his mouth, just like Paul Henreid (remember dreamy Paul Henreid?) did for Bette Davis in “Now, Voyager”, (another Hollywood tearjerker) – and he hands me one. I inhale – and cough.

“Philip, I am sorry.”

“For what?”

He gestures with his hand to the spot where he had performed his little dance. “For that.”

“Not a problem.”

He looks at the three of us, one at a time, as if deciding something, and then tells us about a day when he was sixteen or so, in high school and he said something in class he should not have. A joke about some big government official – maybe it was the President. He couldn’t remember. He knew when he said it, that it was stupid, but that was what people expected of him. He was, as he put it, ‘the clown in the class’. Anyhow the teacher overheard and thought he had gone too far this time. So, the teacher decides to teach him a lesson and sends him to the principal’s office. Amar is okay with that. He gets out of sitting in that boring class. The principal says not one thing but makes him sit on the cement floor. That was a normal punishment. He sits and sits. Then he worries. He worries they are calling his mother and how mad she will be. She will punish him for sure. Chores all day, no sports, no seeing his friends. But he waits, and still no one talks to him and his mother does not come. Instead, the police come. And Amar thinks this is something just to scare a kid, you know? When he says this part, I could see Abdullah out of the corner of my eye hopping on one foot, then the other. Amar, this teenager, they put him into a police van or bus and before he knew it, he was at Police Headquarters. Then he stops telling the story and looks up at the trees for a little while. Raeda throws her cigarette onto the ground. When he speaks again, his voice is different. He tells us they brought him to a room, a cell, I guess. They tie his hands and his feet to a chair. They put – things – in him. That’s what he said. “Put things in me”. At this point my eyes become unfocused and I feel nauseous… and I then… I hear him say “wires and electric”, and Abdullah corrects him: “electricity”. I hear Raeda say “electrocute”, and then she adds, “they do this to my friends in Palestine, too”. That’s why Amar

is freaking out he tells us. Why he is being silly. Why he is dancing. “We are going into the Police now,
and – ”

“No one is going to do this,” Raeda says. “You know this. Just calm the fuck down.”

Things are suddenly very tense. I think to myself – what an unlikely little crowd we are. A week ago, we did not even know one other and I could certainly never have imagined this peculiar scene. What does this have to do with my life? Suddenly I am nervous. I don’t know this script. I don’t know how to do any of what is expected of me. None of this was planned for.

A voice intrudes. It is the guard at the gate who waves at us. “Yalla. Come. Now.” he says. The four of us stumble forward.

Images continue to flicker across the silver screen of my gay over- romanticized mind.

Raeda, the Palestinian actress – fierce and beautiful – is now suddenly Ilsa Lund, the character in “Casablanca” made famous by Ingrid Bergman. Abdullah – the Syrian writer? Dashing resistance fighter, Victor Laszlo. And the young Iraqi dancer? I have not decided yet. Far too handsome to stand in for Peter Lorre (besides Lorre had met a horrid fate early in the picture). Then I think: Ah. Amar is Sam, the affable piano player and singer who Ingrid Bergman begs to perform, “As Time Goes By”, though Humphrey Bogart has forbidden him to do so. “Play it again, Sam,” she says. (Actually, that line was never actually uttered in the movie, though it is widely quoted.)

What is actually said:

Ilsa: Play it once, Sam. For old times’ sake.
Sam: I don’t know what you mean, Miss Ilsa.
Ilsa: Play it, Sam. Play “As Time Goes By.”
Sam: Oh, I can’t remember it, Miss Ilsa. I’m a little rusty on it.
Ilsa: I’ll hum it for you. Da-dy-da-dy-da-dum, da-dy-da-dee-da-dum… Sing it, Sam.

MUSIC: https://youtu.be/0X2wK5zUdrQ
(Dooley Wilson from the film)

You must remember this
A kiss is just a kiss
A sigh is just a sigh
The fundamental things apply
As time goes by
And when two lovers woo
They still say “I love you”

On that you can rely
No matter what the future brings
As time goes by
Moonlight and love songs
Never out of date
Hearts full of passion
Jealousy and hate
Woman needs man, and man must have his mate
That no one can deny
It's still the same old story
A fight for love and glory
A case of do or die
The world will always welcome lovers
As time goes by

"The world has always welcomed lovers." I think on the truth of that. Orpheus and Eurydice, Romeo and Juliet, Catherine and Heathcliff, Vronsky and Anna Karenina, Jay Gatsby and Daisy… Rick and Ilsa. Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal? Should I go on? I suddenly feel such affection for my three companions. Such profound respect, such awe for the lives they lead. What is it that binds us? Or at least me to them, and the three of them to each other? Is it our sweet absurd adoration of theatre? Possibly.

We are simply four theatre geeks. An unlikely traveling troupe. We have existed since the Middle Ages. No, since ancient Greece. We are a ragged band of vagabond artists. (Except Raeda dresses way better.)

I imagine whoever awaits us inside the Marrakech Police Station has no interest in me or my sentiments or could give a shit about theatre or these very talented storytellers. *(as Humphrey Bogart) "I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world."*

I can't pull off being Bogart. I am no classic hero. No, just a theatre fanatic. From the start. Ever since I made up stories with puppets and marionettes in my bedroom, instead of doing sports. But in some ironic twist, I am cast here as the guy that needs to assure my friends get what they need. They've come a long way in good faith. Unlike Bogart, I am not trying to get my comrades *out* of the country to safety. I need to keep them *in* the country – for just one more week. Maybe I am what they call, the anti-hero?

This rare and remarkable convening of 35 performing artists – half American and half Arab – was in and of itself a bit of a marvel. Planning was a three-year affair and convincing my boss that re-locating what had been an annual American event, held in the mountains of Utah for decades, to North Africa was a forever argument. International exchange I explained to her was not really an exchange when the United States was always the central geography of the

equation. Sure, bringing international artists to the American West was itself an accomplishment, but it also normalized the USA as the mecca of the cultural universe – which was pretentious. What would it look like to spirit the convening away to a far destination? To ask Americans, for a change, to be the ones to stand on foreign soil. How might it meaningfully imbalance the comfort of 'home' and what's taken for granted, for the American writers? Of course, this would be true for the Arab participants too. Morocco was not Egypt, or Jordan, or Syria, or Lebanon. Even the Moroccan Arabic dialect, "Dirija", – I was soon to learn – had little or no familiarity to our artists from the Levant or Cairo.

Anyhow, I had won the battle to relocate the workshop. But first, my boss insisted on sending a private security firm to check out our venue – a bucolic residence hotel some 20 kilometers from the center of Marrakech – with plenty of space to rehearse. This man's report back, for which he charged us $20,000? That we were utterly safe, because no terrorist cell gave a fuck about a bunch of theatre freaks in the Moroccan desert. He did however suggest that our parent organization more carefully plan for their future film festival coming up imminently in London. Of course, our boss ignored that advice. London was London. What bad things could possibly happen in London?

It's a Sunday and there are few people inside the police station. Our footsteps echo on the red tiles of the corridor. We are ushered into a large room, where behind a large grey metal desk sits an Officer in uniform. He is not Claude Rains.

I explain our purpose.

"We're closed today," he says.

"No, you are not closed," It's Raeda. Her activist is activated. She speaks calmly, though, almost seductively. "If you were closed, then why did you invite us in?"

"To tell you we are closed."

Suddenly I'm in another classic Hollywood movie.

SOUND: "Somewhere Over the Rainbow"

Yes. "The Wizard of Oz." I am Dorothy Gale, of course, with my three pals: the Scarecrow, Cowardly Lion and Tin Man. Trying to convince the Wizard's guard that we just had to get in to see the Wizard about our business. We had killed the wicked witch. We had her broomstick as proof. We were not about to be sent away.

"We were sent by Glinda, the Good Witch of the North."
"Prove it."
"She's wearing the Ruby Slippers she gave him," and Amar points at my feet. And I twirl like Judy Garland and show off my sparkling red pumps. (I told you I was gay.)

(pause)

Instead I say: “We were sent by the King’s Minister. Monsieur Azoulay,”

“Were you?”

“I have the email from him right here on my phone.” And I fumble to open the phone, ask for the WIFI information, which does not work and then does work, and scroll and scroll until the Minister’s email pops up. The policeman reads it, pretends to be unimpressed. But we know we have won this argument.

And then, bureaucracy rains down from the heavens. Out come the forms. Each of my friends has to fill out five copies of the same document, because apparently each copy must be in original blue ink. And there are no extra pens. I scramble through my backpack. Raeda, Abdullah, and Amar fill out the paperwork, conferring when there is yet another nonsense question. The officer takes the forms and disappears.

“You know this is bullshit,” says Raeda. “These papers mean nothing. They are not going to be filed anywhere. They will be thrown in the trash. The man has nothing to do. So he’s playing with us. Believe me. I know this world very well.”

After 30 minutes or more, the man who is not Claude Rains comes back, and returns one copy of each of the forms to us, and then tells us we need to find a copy machine in town and make a new copy of each page, and then bring those back to him. Forget Hollywood. We are in a Kafka play. In the entire main Police Station in Marrakech Morocco, we are told, there is not one working copy machine.

“Where do we go?” I ask. We are directed to a copy shop a few blocks away. Only it is not a “few blocks away” – more like three kilometers – and so we squeeze into a taxi. The copy shop is open – but their only copy machine has over-heated. A rapid-fire exchange in Arabic ensues among my friends and the copy shop owner, and as we walk out, I ask, “Where are we going now?” “You are not going to believe this,” says Abdullah. Our destination is a butcher shop.” “Is it Kaysher?” I ask.

The smell of raw meat stings my nose. After more wrangling and an exchange of money, we are brought to the back of the store, where an ancient xerox sits next to carcasses of sheep and goats and piles of Merguez. But this machine works. We cab it back to the Prefecture. Amazingly, the officer is still there and he takes the copies, plops them down on the top of piles and piles of other unfiled papers, and hands us three documents, which seem to assure the extension of each visa for seven more days.

“Merci, monsieur.” Nothing. “Shukran” I add.

“De Rien.”

In “Casablanca”, an SS Officer must be shot, and infidelities rekindled. People are bought off, others are betrayed, lies are told, back stories are revealed. And hearts are shattered. Our plays have their own different dramas.

None of us could have predicted the outcome when artists from Casablanca, Beirut, Damascus, Cairo, Tunis, Ramallah and Amman meet Americans from New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Minneapolis, Atlanta, and Boston.

“Write in the language in which you dream,” we always said. We will understand.

In one room, a Syrian playwright dramatizes the plight of women left behind during the Syrian War. The actresses dressed in black, tell stories, sing traditional music, dance. Some of the performers are now living in exile, scattered across Scandinavia, Belgium, France and Canada, so their imagined visit back home triggers a good deal of grief – and anger. Some days rehearsals have to stop, just to give the artists room to feel the ache. And to argue with great fervor over politics.

Some of the actors in this play are not even Syrian, but as Lebanese or Palestinian or Egyptian performers they so their best to master the dialect and cadence of Syrian Arabic.

Many of the same Arab actresses from the Syrian rehearsal are invited to be part of an American play, which rehearses on alternate days. A Korean-born American author had penned the story of a North Korean woman who escapes to the South, finds a lover, but is compelled to return home to Pyongyang to be with her father, her only blood relative. The Arab actors are asked to sing Korean Pop as part of a musical chorus. A bit insane. That is, until the themes of returning to one’s home revealed themselves and then, there is instant recognition. And endless conversation. And more weeping. The women of Syria meet the story of the Korean Diaspora. Who knew?

In yet another rehearsal, a young Black American writes a ghost play, where she brings to light the violence perpetrated against transsexual black women. At one rehearsal I furiously take notes about what I see as the gaps in the dramaturgy. When I leave the room, eager to share my insights with the creative team before their final reading the following week, there sits Raeda, on the cement stairs outside, wrapped around herself like a Pieta, sobbing.

I kneel beside her. “What is it?”

Her voice is choked. “I didn’t know, Philip. I didn’t know any of this.”

“Didn’t know what?”

“That even in America, land of freedom, there is such profound violence, such hate, against Black women. I mean, I’m not stupid. I know your history, your racism. We have this too. But these people, these women were hunted by police? Now? Today? I did not know this kind of brutality is

not only in my part of the world, but in yours too. I cannot breathe."

Her vulnerability empties me of my concerns about the script. I start to re-think my purpose here. Who gets to tell the story? Who gets to witness it? And who – with hubris – gives the notes?

Here in our odd little community 25 minutes from the heart of Marrakech, we have become a kind of family. The final reading of the Syrian play a week later, is performed totally in Arabic. All the audience has to guide them is one printed paragraph describing the basic contours of the story. There is not a full translation – because the script changed in rehearsal every day. Still the Americans watching laugh heartily, at jokes they do not particularly understand, but find hilarious, as the writer intended. And I watch their eyes grow teary. They do not really get one single word of dialogue but the power of the actors, and the rhythms of the language and the intentions of the stories, are undeniably put across.

In the background, the Call to Prayer, quietly underneath

The call to prayer echoed across the rehearsal halls five times each day and into the evening. As week two became our third and final week and inshallah we were, all of us, everyone, still together, we became accustomed to hearing the prayers. The Muezzin simply another member of our cast. His voice embedded itself into the fabric of every scene, every character, every story. A soundtrack. It was an underscore to the Korean American story of a yearning so dear for one's father that a woman risks her life to swim back across a freezing river to find him. It was the orchestra under the keening of the Syrian women, and as a counterpoint to an avantgarde French and Arabic adaptation of a British play by Sarah Kane. It merged with the piano score under the dance performance that Amar choreographed, and it wrapped itself around the words of an American author wrestling with undocumented immigrants in Newark, New Jersey.

I imagine it meant very different things to the artists who came from different places around the world. If you were an Arab artist, but you lived in Europe now, maybe that prayer was a potent memory – maybe sentimental or, intrusive or even painful. If you lived in the Middle East or North Africa, the sound might well have disappeared into the well of your consciousness. Or not. But if you were like me, a Jewish boy raised in the environs of New York City, it was a new, and strange and powerful and clarifying moment. Five times a day. Each and every time. I was reminded I was not home. But I was. Home.

(HE listens to the prayer for a bit, and then over it, he sings as the call to prayer continues underneath and finally disappears before the end of his song.)

(Singing):

It's still the same old story

A fight for love and glory
A case of do or die
The world will always welcome lovers
As time goes by

THE NARRATOR opens his thermos of water, pour a bit into his cup, and raises the glass:

The Theatre Program I ran stopped its work a few years ago. The organization changed its mission. I moved on to a new job.

My Arab friends and I? We are still very close. We visit. I still love them very much. I think I actually fell in love with them.

“We’ll always have Paris,” Bogart tells Bergman.

I’ll always have Marrakech. (HE toasts the audience): Here’s lookin’ at you, Habibi. (He drinks) I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

https://youtu.be/hNOPYqRO7×8
(As Time Goes By with ARABIC LYRICS)

– END OF PLAY –