

Ancram Opera House, Ancram, NY

Invasion!, by Jonas Hassen Khemiri. Translated by Rachel Willson-Broyles.
Directed by Jeffrey Mousseau. Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“The strange thing about Abulkasem was that the word stuck around, it changed, it grew, it lived on.”

Are you capable of being surprised anymore by what happens in a theatre? I find I’m not. Ancram Opera House’s production of “Invasion!” comes with the intention of surprise, and so no programs are made available before the show (you can get one afterward) but that didn’t alter my perception of what was happening. Director Jeffrey Mousseau has done as good a job as possible of making surprise a major element of the play, but what happens never got in my way. Thankfully, I enjoyed the play thanks to four excellent actors interpreting the author’s motives and the director’s concept. The final outcome is a unique celebration of identity and motivation as interpreted by a trio of historians on a decidedly peculiar television talk/quiz show.



Sophie Zmorrod Laruelle, Ali Andre Ali, Abuzar Farrukh, and Ahmad Maher;
Photo: Vanessa Baer.

Who is Abul Kasemi? The question pushes us through the lengthy one-act play in Ancram. And who are the people pursuing the question? Are they any more real than the two characters in a classic play that opens this performance? Is one of them the mysterious Kasemi? Is one of the men who interrupts their work Kasemi? Is he a stripper, a disco dancer, a woman, perhaps. The invaders attempt to draw a word-picture of a mythic figure who may exist in one form or another, or who may exist only in reputation. The players want answers. The answers needs players. The event wants an audience willing to question everything they know, everything they hear and everything they see. The play asks a lot of its audience. Based on my experience of

the piece, the audience is very willing to play along.

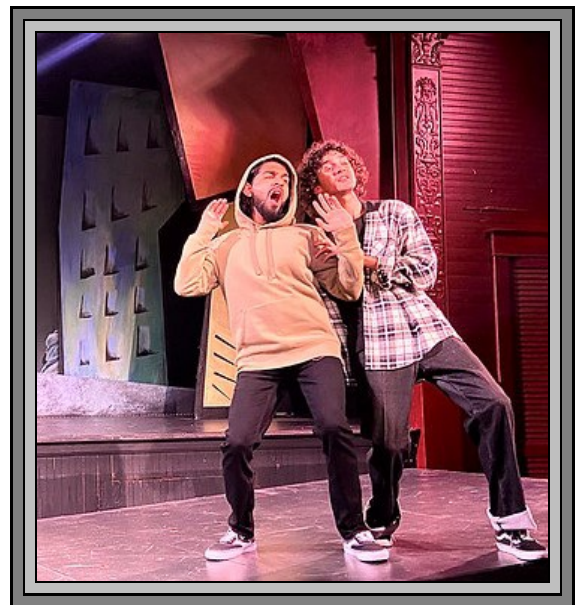


Sophie Zmorrod Laruelle, Ali Andre Ali;
Photo: B. Docktor

Sophie Zmorrod Laruelle is the only actual woman in the company. She undertakes many roles in the course of the nearly two hours of the play. Her career has taken her into many other dark places and this play gives her another fine opportunity to display both her versatility in style and her ability to seem to explain the ridiculously unexplainable.

She is joined, and equalled, by Ali Andre Ali, an actor/musician of Palestinian and Irish descent whose good looks hide an incredible aptitude for character acting. He is the funniest person on stage in this play and often made me laugh when what I wanted to do was ponder new information. His performance takes him to very peculiar places in the theatrical world. He plays period melodrama, contemporary cross-dressing entertainment and comical dramatic realizations.

On the flip side of the middle-eastern coin that is this play we have two actors who prepare us for what is to come and then become the play's internal advocates in the search for truth and understanding. Ahmad Maher and Abuzar Farrukh often work in tandem in this play, although they create their own special characters as the play goes on. Farrukh is from Pakistan and his professional credits are as varied and exciting as those of Laruelle. His many roles in this play are as different as they can be and his flair for moving among them is excellent. The same can be said for Maher, an Egyptian-born actor who has performed on stage in New York, Egypt and Sweden. He opens the show with word and action and at one point takes your breath away without half-trying. All four actors take and keep control of their audience with no lags, no snags, and no nags. They play the play with utter conviction, each seeming to feel that the elusive Abul Kasemi may be among their tight-knit group. . .and they could be right.



Abuzar Farrukh and Ahmad Maher;
Photo: Vanessa Baer.

On Sara Edkins busy set, well lit by Jess Elliot, in perfect costumes designed by Rashida Nelson this company of four seem to be an unlimited company of players. The play is a mystery

that outshines Agatha Christie, especially once you realize that there are quirky puzzles in the script, and you won't know about them until well after you see the play, and in Mousseau's creative hands the play develops into a most satisfying show without a conclusive thought to tie it all up in a fine, hard knot. It is very worth your while.

+ 08/07/2022 +

Invasion! plays at the Ancram Opera House, Routs 7A, Ancram, NY through August 21. For informatio and tickets go to their website at www.ancramioperahouse.org.