

Picking Up The Scent

Picking Up The Scent by Yussef El Guindi Arab Stages,
Volume 1, Number 2 (Spring 2015) ©2015 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Ce
nter Publications

If interested in producing the work, kindly contact:

Leah Hamos

Gersh Agency

41 Madison Ave, 33rd Floor

New York, NY 10010

212.634.8153

lhamos@gershny.com

Cast

Nisrin - 20s or 30s

Hisham - 20s or 30s

Annabel - 20s or 30s

Lights up on a woman, NISRIN, at a table. She picks up a perfume bottle. She looks at it. She sprays a little on her wrist. She smells it. Light change. A man, HISHAM, enters, as she rubs the scented wrist on her neck. He wraps his arms around her and nuzzles his nose close to her neck. He makes an appreciative noise as he takes in the scent.

HISHAM: I have good taste.

NISRIN: What's the occasion?

HISHAM: Do I need a reason to give my wife a present?

NISRIN: It's lovely—Citrus—Lemon trees and a picnic... cool shades.

HISHAM: What else? What else does it remind you of?

NISRIN: It reminds me my husband is a very thoughtful individual. Who usually buys me presents when he has bad news to tell me.

HISHAM: I'm offended. We haven't been married long enough for me to be that predictable. I'm a little harder to read, surely.

NISRIN: It's why I married you. You're an easy read. Like a cheap romance novel. The kind you pick up at the airport.

HISHAM: Okay, now you're just being insulting. I'm a lot more mysterious than that. If we're talking books, compare me to a good mystery novel, at the very least. Men in trench coats under street lights. Beautiful women spotted through upstairs windows.

NISRIN: A mystery, huh?

HISHAM: The kind where the woman comes to the private eye for help. She comes in wearing some beautiful scent he can't stop thinking about after she leaves. He takes the case for that reason alone. He wants to follow the scent, literally. He wants to keep breathing it in.

He holds her again.

NISRIN: Isn't there usually some unpleasant secret in mystery novels? What are you keeping from me?

HISHAM: We don't want to take the analogy too far.

NISRIN: Hisham?

HISHAM: I'm more about the trench coats and the beautiful women.

NISRIN: Just tell me. What's going on?

Beat. HISHAM takes a breath.

HISHAM: Okay... now... don't get upset.

NISRIN: I knew it.

HISHAM: No gnashing of teeth allowed.

NISRIN: I'm already gnashing. What is it?

HISHAM: Just remember the perfume bottle.

She levels a look at him, urging him to spill.

I'm going to help Hassan at the archaeological site.

She looks at him. Then moves away from him.

NISRIN: You do want to play the hero.

HISHAM: No. I would just like to do my job.

NISRIN (*reining in her emotions*): A job, Hisham, is something you go to with a good idea you'll return from at the end of the day. You go in, say hi to your co-workers. You gossip about what you saw on TV

the night before. A few hours of work and then you come home.

HISHAM: All of which I plan to do.

NISRIN: You're sure of that? War notwithstanding. The bombs won't magically effect you. Because, why? They effect others, not you? Your Ph.D. in archaeology somehow protects you?

HISHAM: The fighting hasn't reached the site yet.

NISRIN: You're taking the word of our government paid mouthpieces who call themselves journalists?

HISHAM: Now's the time to go before it really gets bad.

NISRIN: Their thugs are already there kidnapping and killing people. Whole neighborhoods are gone. They're laying the groundwork for a full scale assault.

HISHAM: And before that assault rolls in, we need to rescue as many objects as we can.

NISRIN: "Rescue." You talk of it as some life saving mission. These are scraps from another time you're going after. They're not worth losing your life over.

HISHAM: It's our history, Nisrin; which I'm very proud of. Do I put down your study of poetry?

NISRIN: I wouldn't risk my life over it.

HISHAM: It's important enough for you to go all the way to London to study it.

NISRIN: Is this what this is about? My going abroad to study? You're going to get back at me by going off to some war zone?

HISHAM: It's not a war zone yet.

NISRIN: "Yet." In about two seconds. And you don't need actual tanks to call it a war.

HISHAM: In those two seconds you can uncover a whole lot.

NISRIN: Seriously, is this about me pursuing my studies?

HISHAM: That's the second insult today.

NISRIN: Is it?

HISHAM: I *want* you to go. I believe in your passion. Why can't you support mine?

NISRIN: Because the only thing *I* might die from is boredom in class. If armed men were roaming the halls of London University picking off students, or bombs were falling on King's Cross, no, I wouldn't go.

I wouldn't subject you to that worry. I'd study my poetry elsewhere, like any sane person.

HISHAM: You can pursue your passion where you want. Mine is pretty site-specific. I have to be there. Nisrin, Hassan is uncovering amazing things already. An entire domestic dwelling intact. Whole inscriptions. He's piecing together what life was like almost three thousand years ago for ordinary people. This is too important to ignore.

NISRIN: So wait until things calm down and then go.

HISHAM: Nobody's going to cordon off that area and tell the combatants to kill themselves somewhere else.

Slight beat.

You know what really infuriates me about war? Apart from, you know, people getting killed who have no business dying so horribly and too soon. Is that you realize there's no one at the steering wheel of this great big fuck-up called war. I don't know why I expect there to be some kind of intelligence when everyone's going nuts. But I do. Then you realize, wait, there isn't because it's *war*. Which means everyone's checked their brain at the door. And what everyone seems to be doing at this point is just managing a catastrophe. Nisrin: we have to save what we can; while we can. They won't get to rob us of our history. They may be fucking up our present and our future, but they don't get to destroy our heritage. *Our* history.

NISRIN (*Agitated*): Okay, just...

HISHAM: I wish Hassan had left the site buried, but now that it's visible, it'll be used to shoot from, and fight around, which means firepower is going to target that area.

NISRIN: Fine, you're going. I don't need to hear all your reasonable arguments for doing what will still be a stupid thing to do!

Beat.

HISHAM: You're a poet. You have to understand. To step into another time. Figure out what life was like for ordinary people. Kings and queens live on; but do we get to resurrect lives like ours? And be able to tell their stories again? ... I have a great job: I help bring back the dead.

NISRIN: You don't need to be a poet to point out the irony there. There's a greater chance of you joining them than you bringing anyone back from the grave.

Slight beat.

HISHAM: I love the fact that you're going to study abroad. I admire you for pursuing what you love. The way you fought to get the visas. Found a place to stay. How you met every obstacle with an attitude of "that's not going to stop me." Between the war, and family expectations, everything around you is telling you to shut up and hide. But you said "screw that."

NISRIN: You sure I'm not running away? Getting out of the country when others can't?

HISHAM: You're standing up for what you believe in. And doing it when everything's going to hell, which is exactly the time to stand up for what you believe in.

NISRIN: Silly little poems. Against all that.

HISHAM: Especially during this time. Each of those poems, writing them, studying them, each line: it's a glorious middle finger to those who would steal everything decent and good from us. They do everything they can to bury us in their savagery. Maybe we can't bring down the tyrants alone, but I won't be made to feel even more helpless by being turned away from what I love. This is how I resist. How we both do. You with your poetry, me with my... my ruins.

NISRIN looks at him.

NISRIN: It's four months from now... I'm remembering you... And I think I've lost you.

HISHAM: What?

Light change. Sound of an airport. Duty Free shop. ANNABEL enters. She wears an outfit appropriate for her job as an airport sales person. HISHAM maintains his gaze on NISRIN for a second, then exits.

ANNABEL: One of my favorites. "Elysian."

She picks up the perfume bottle and sprays a little on a stick of paper.

It smells of all things summer, doesn't it? Picnics, cool shades. A perfect blend for hotter climates.

She smells it.

You don't want something too clingy or musky. Something light as linen for these summer months. Are you interested in purchasing a bottle, madam?

NISRIN (*distracted*): What?

ANNABEL: Would you like me to wrap a bottle for you?

NISRIN: I dropped mine. When I first came.

ANNABEL: Dropped?

NISRIN (*still speaking as if half present, half somewhere else*): I had a bottle of this perfume. When I first came to London. A present from my husband. It slipped out of my hand in the bathroom.

ANNABEL: Oh. I'm sorry. Lucky for you we stock it.

NISRIN: My whole flat smelt of it for weeks. You could smell it in the hallway. It made me laugh. To think what others must have thought of me. "Look at that foreign woman, drowning herself in perfume."

ANNABEL: There's nothing wrong walking around smelling nice. Not in my book.

NISRIN (*still distracted by the memory*): It was as if he were home. When I smelt that. I would return to my flat and I'd imagine he'd come on a surprise visit. As if it was his cologne.

ANNABEL: Sorry?

NISRIN: My husband.

ANNABEL (*confused*): Oh, right. His present.

NISRIN: My husband's an archaeologist.

ANNABEL: Oh yes?

NISRIN: He digs up ruins. He brings back the dead. That's the way he likes to think of it.

ANNABEL: That sounds exciting.

NISRIN: I think he's been murdered.

Light change.

I'm going to my lectures, Hisham. I'm so thrilled to be here. To sit and listen to my professors talk about Edmund Spenser and John Donne. Milton. Dryden. I think I'm in heaven. To spend my days studying such writers. To think of nothing but syntax and grammar. Rhythm, meter, and genius. You were right, it is my kind of resistance. And when they speak of war—when it's mentioned in relation to some of these writers, it feels unreal. As if there couldn't possibly be any violence associated with these great works. It's only a description of blood. A pool of words, words spilled, not real blood. It's only when I go home and smell your perfume that I remember. And that pool of words turns back into real blood. Listening to the news... Why didn't you come with me? I should have pleaded. If only so I wouldn't feel so damn guilty now for these wonderful moments of forgetting.

Light change.

ANNABEL: Madam? Are you alright?

Another light change. HISHAM enters. Perhaps he appears a little dusty, as if he's been digging. He carries a very small jar/container. Very faint sounds of war—gun fire, an explosion—will play at a couple of points as he speaks.

HISHAM: Look at what we've found. In my bones I'm sure I know what it is, even though Hassan says we can't jump to any conclusions. Look at the attached photo. I'm pretty sure it's a jar that held a

fragrance. Lilies are mentioned everywhere in stone inscriptions. I wouldn't be surprised if the area had an ancient perfumery. I can almost smell the fragrance it held. I know that's totally my imagination, but we'll be able to run tests. Can you believe it if it's true?

NISRIN: Hisham.

HISHAM: Coming here has been so worth it.

NISRIN: Where are you? You're not responding to my e-mails.

HISHAM: Everything confirms this site was someone's home. I'm going crazy, in a good way, imagining the lives of the people who lived here. I'm terrified all this might be blown to pieces before we can collect everything and get an idea of who these people were. I feel like I'm at an operating table and I have just minutes left trying to save someone's life before the bombs fall on us.

Light change.

NISRIN (*as if on the phone*): Hisham? Can you hear me?

HISHAM (*as if on the phone*): Nisrin? How are you enjoying London?

NISRIN (*as if on the phone*): I can barely hear you. What was that?

Re: Faint sound of an explosion.

HISHAM (*as if on the phone*): It's nothing.

NISRIN (*as if on the phone*): That sounded like an explosion. Was that an explosion?

HISHAM (*as if on the phone*): Don't worry. The rebels here said we're safe.

NISRIN (*as if on the phone*): Hisham, I can't hear you.

HISHAM (*as if on the phone*): Hello?

NISRIN (*as if on the phone*): Hisham?

Light change. Spot back on NISRIN. HISHAM along with ANNABEL [now as the woman HISHAM describes], remain in the dark.

The strangest thing is happening: ... I'm starting to see everything through your eyes. I walk the streets of London and feel like an archaeologist. I see the whole of London like it's long been buried and I am recreating it in my mind's eye. Everything feels like it's covered in ash. As if some terrible cataclysm has befallen this city. And I do what you do: I try and bring the site back to life. Only I don't know what I'm trying to recover since it's all there right in front of me.

Lights up on HISHAM next to "ANNABEL."

HISHAM: I hold this fragrance jar and imagine the woman who might have held it.

"ANNABEL" takes the jar from HISHAM and does what he describes.

NISRIN: London's turned to ash. Ash in the food I taste. Ash in my eyes.

HISHAM: She pours a little out and rubs it on her wrists. Along her neck.

A little laugh.

Don't get jealous, Nisrin, but I think I'm falling in love with this woman. She's a little old for me at over two thousand years. But she's really firing up my imagination.

NISRIN: I'm starting to look at everyone as if I'm seeing them before the cataclysm. Before their lives changed forever. The nightlife, the laughing. Their ignorance of what's happening around the edges of their lives. How dare they talk of stupid stuff like music and movies when five hours away by plane the world is ending.

HISHAM: Maybe she's getting ready for her lover. Her husband's been away too long and she's forced to find affection elsewhere. So of course I have to be her lover since I'm the one creating this scenario.

NISRIN: You've robbed me of my pleasure, Hisham. You told me to go and throw myself into my poetry but I keep getting dragged back. *You* drag me back with worry, and all I'm tasting is the dirt you're sifting through. This isn't resistance anymore. I can't fight back the way we talked about. All I can think of is the war and that no one's paying attention. Not even you it seems.

HISHAM: Our imagination is something else, isn't it? This little artifact. The way it's opened a whole new world for me.

NISRIN: Where are you, Hisham? Stop what you're doing and find a way to reach me.

HISHAM: I'm sending a letter with this English journalist. I want you to know I've never been more excited and you shouldn't worry. Last night I had the best dream. I think it's a reward for spending so much energy trying to imagine the lives of the people who lived here. Especially this woman I keep seeing. I won't go into the whole dream in case you get jealous, but she started to speak to me.

"ANNABEL" turns to him as if she wants to tell him something.

As if this woman made a special trip to tell me her story. She seemed so full of joy and wanted to speak of her life. But stupid gunfire woke me up.

NISRIN: Hisham!

HISHAM (*irritated*): What?

Light change that isolates NISRIN and HISHAM. They speak directly to each other now. "ANNABEL" has exited.

NISRIN: Where have you been?

HISHAM: Where else would I be?

NISRIN: I've been frantically trying to reach you. Your family's been frantically trying to reach you.

HISHAM: You've found me. How's London?

NISRIN: You can't ask me how London is like nothing's the matter. I'm worried sick!

HISHAM: I'm *fine*. Hassan's fine. We're doing great work. Did you get my letter?

NISRIN: What letter?

HISHAM: I sent you a letter with a journalist.

NISRIN: Did you get any of my e-mails?

HISHAM: Everything's down. Most of the computer guys in this town have joined the rebels. If you want your computer fixed you have to go to the front lines. Hassan's assistant went, but he had his computer clipped by enemy fire. The rebels were so mad, they said they'd fix it for free. I'm glad we're on the side of the tech guys here.

NISRIN: I'm so angry with you right now I could hit you.

HISHAM: I'm *sorry*. How have you been?

NISRIN: I'm telling you!

HISHAM: Tell me about London.

NISRIN: I'm not able to enjoy anything anymore! My joy lasted for about two minutes. I hate the fact that people walk around oblivious about our suffering.

HISHAM: You can't blame them.

NISRIN: Of course I can't; but I'm doing it anyway.

HISHAM: Did you try their fish and chips yet?

NISRIN: I don't want to talk about fish and chips!

HISHAM: Did you go to Marks and Spencer and get the prawn sandwich?

NISRIN: Hisham!

HISHAM: Okay, but remember to bring that cake back with you, the one with the pink squares and the marzipan.

NISRIN: Does that mean I'm going to see you? Soon?

HISHAM: God willing. Just a little while longer.

NISRIN: You could have all the cake and sandwiches you want if you came to London.

HISHAM: I'm sorry I'm putting you through this. I can't tell you what a relief it is to know you're safe out of the country.

Cutting her before she can respond.

I know, it's not fair that I can't do the same for you. But we've just scratched the surface. They've peeled off some fighters to protect the site, but it's only a matter of time before the fighting makes its way to this spot.

NISRIN: Please don't get cocky just because the worst hasn't happened.

HISHAM: I know it must be harder for you; being anxious all the time.

NISRIN: I think you like the attention.

HISHAM: I do; but we're both where we need to be. More than ever I believe we should spend what time we have doing what we love. And yes, also being with who we love, *you*. But I've spent too much of my life living with so much fear. I'm so mad that we've... that *I've* allowed that to happen. That I've let these monsters have such power over me. And because I did, my first fight has to be with this terror that's made such a coward of me. I have... I have seen so much good in this town. People aren't scared anymore. You wouldn't believe the light in people's eyes now.

They look at each other.

NISRIN: I want to come to you.

HISHAM: Didn't you hear what I said? You need to be doing what you love now more than ever. Write more poetry. Enjoy the hell out of London.

NISRIN: Wait ... how can I be touching you?

HISHAM: Why would the laws of physics apply here?

NISRIN: Here?

She opens his jacket. She sees a large patch of blood on his shirt.

Oh no, oh no, oh no.

HISHAM: That gun fire that woke me up? From my beautiful dream about the woman holding the perfume jar? It tore right through the wall where my bed was I know that woman was trying to tell me something.

NISRIN: Oh Hisham.

HISHAM: Don't worry; it didn't hurt. It happened too quickly to hurt.

NISRIN: Are you...? I don't know what this is. Are you dead? Am I dreaming this?

HISHAM: I'm not sure, to be honest.

NISRIN: I'm coming.

HISHAM: Please don't do that.

NISRIN: I'm getting on a plane and coming to you.

HISHAM: It's too dangerous now. Wait until the fighting has stopped.

NISRIN: I'm coming to find you.

HISHAM: Nisrin, don't. Wait.

Light change. Airport sounds. HISHAM exits.

ANNABEL: Madam? Are you alright? Would you like me to get someone from customer service?

NISRIN: No... No, I'm fine. I have to go.

ANNABEL (*regarding the perfume*): Will you be taking a bottle with you?

NISRIN: No. I can't stand that smell now.

NISRIN exits. ANNABEL looks at the perfume. She brings it to her nose and breathes in the fragrance. Light change. Annabel now speaks as the woman HISHAM spoke of, the one who may have owned the fragrance jar. If she had a scarf around her neck, she now drapes it over her head.

ANNABEL/ WOMAN FROM THE PAST: What I started to say to say to you before you woke up... What I wanted to tell you was, simply—thank you.

Thank you for being so passionate about wanting to find out about me. Who knew I would have an

admirer after all this time. After I had turned to dust.

Everything passes... everything passed so quickly. Each moment swallowed by the next, and the next. Life gone in a second. And here you are trying to piece it together. And more, imagining the pieces, and the links between your time, and mine.

The jar you found held lilies, Hisham. Oils, and herbs. I would make my own fragrances. I would sell them to all the travelers who passed through our city. Assyrians, Egyptians. Persians, Phoenicians. All the different tribes who passed through here. I sold these amazing fragrances to all those tired travelers.

But then the wars came. So much bloodletting. Such madness. I don't know what drives people to go over such cliffs in their souls.

Hisham: Don't stop digging. I'll tell you more the more you unearth. Hisham, please, don't stop looking for me.

Find me.

Blackout. End play.

Yussef El Guindi's most recent productions include Threesome (Portland Center Stage), and Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World (winner of the Steinberg/American Theater Critics Association's New Play Award in 2012; and the 2011 Gregory Award) also at ACT and at Center Repertory Company (Walnut Creek, CA) 2013; and Language Rooms (Edgerton Foundation New American Play Award), co-produced by Golden Thread Productions and the Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco; at the Wilma Theater in Philadelphia (premiere), and at the Los Angeles Theater Center. Other productions: Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat was produced by Silk Road Theater Project and won the M. Elizabeth Osborn award. His play Back of the Throat (winner of L.A. Weekly's Excellence in Playwriting Award for 2006), among others, have been published by Dramatist Play Service. Yussef is the recipient of the 2010 Middle East America Distinguished Playwright Award. Picking up the Scent will be staged as part of the ReOrient Festival of Short Plays in the Fall, produced by Golden Thread Productions in San Francisco.



Volume 1, Number 2 (Spring 2015)

©2015 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications

Founders: Marvin Carlson and Frank Hentschker

Editor-in-Chief: Marvin Carlson

Editorial and Advisory Board: Fawzia Afzal-Khan, Dina Amin, Khalid Amine, Hazem Azmy, Dalia Basiouny, Katherine Donovan, Masud Hamdan, Sameh Hanna, Rolf C. Hemke, Katherine Hennessey, Areeg Ibrahim, Jamil Khoury, Dominika Laster, Margaret Litvin, Rebekah Maggor, Safi Mahfouz, Robert Myers, Michael Malek Najjar, Hala Nassar, George Potter, Juan Recondo, Nada Saab, Asaad Al-Saleh, Torange Yeghiazarian, Edward Ziter.

Managing Editor: Joy Arab

Table of Content

Essays

- *Science Fiction in the Arab World: Tawfiq al-Hakim's Voyage to Tomorrow (Rihlatun ilal-ghad)* by Rani Bhargav
- *Tawfik al-Hakim and the Social Responsibility of the Artist* by Majeed Mohammed Midhin
- *Junun: Poetics in the Discourse of Protest and Love* by Rafika Zahrouni
- *Ritual and Myth in Dalia Basiouny's Magic of Borolos* by Amal Aly Mazhar
- *Staging the Self: Autobiography in the Theatre of Sa`dallah Wannous* by Ali Souleman
- *The Arab Theatre Festival* by Jaouad Radouan
- *France's Théâtre d'al-Assifa: An Arab-based Alternative Theatre Model* by Magdi Youssef
- *A Dramatic Anticipation of the Arab Spring and a Dramatic Reflection Upon It* by Eiman Tounsi
- *Rania Khalil's Flag Piece* by Dalia Basiouny and Marvin Carlson
- *Silk Road Solos: A Three-Thread Performative Stitch* by Jamil Khoury

Short Plays

- Excerpts from *Jihad Against Violence: Oh ISIS Up Yours!* by Fawzia Afzal-Khan
- *Alternative Dramaturgy for Jihad Against Violence: Oh ISIS Up Yours!* By Fawzia Afzal-Khan, Nesrin Alrefaai, Katherine Mezur
- ReOrient Theatre Festival 2015:
 - Bitterenders* by Hannah Khalil
 - Lost Kingdom* by Hassan Abdulrazzak
 - Picking Up The Scent* by Yussef El Guindi
 - The House* by Tala Manassah & Mona Mansour

Reviews

- *Edward Ziter's Political Performance in Syria - A Book Review* by Safi Mahmoud Mahfouz
- *The Gap Between Generations: The Revolt of the Young: Essays by Tawif al-Hakim-* A Book Review by Michael Malek Najjar

Announcements

- *Malumat*: Resources for Research, Writing/Publishing, Teaching, & Performing Arts compiled by Kate C. Wilson

www.arabstages.org

arabstages@gc.cuny.edu

Martin E. Segal Theatre Center

Frank Hentschker, Executive Director

Marvin Carlson, Director of Publications

Rebecca Sheahan, Managing Director