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From the Desk of Jamil Khoury



Running the Obstacle Course

Hear Jamil Read His Essay for You

Obstacle Course is a 45-minute video play that I adapted from my full-length stage play *Mosque Alert*. Set in a suburb of Chicago, it explores reactions to a proposed Islamic Community Center on the site of a beloved landmark. But when bias intersects with zoning, a seemingly routine approval process gets heated.

At heart, *Obstacle Course* is a story about NIMBYism (Not In My Backyard), religious pluralism, and the challenges of liberal democracy.

I set out to explore a particular manifestation of Islamophobia in public life; that is, resistance to the building of mosques, or Muslim houses of worship. It is a phenomenon occurring throughout the United States and Canada, as well as Europe, Russia, Australia, and large parts of Asia.

If Muslims and Islam evoke fear for many non-Muslims, then mosques become a trigger for Islamophobic panic, signaling not only the physical presence of Islam, its immediate proximity, but the reality and rootedness and longevity of Muslims



Its visibility and corporality make the mosque a brick and mortar actualization of “all things Muslim,” which, depending on the seer, can have disparate meanings: a cherished prayer hall, a welcome neighbor, an existential threat.

Is a mosque a building in which Muslims worship God or in which Muslims plot our demise? It’s a persistent angst, wrapped in a national security discourse.

Sadly, the buildings where Muslims peaceably gather to pray have become three-dimensional canvases on which to draw our suspicions and fears.



NIMBYism teaches us a great deal about how we imagine community and understand security. In the abstract or the hypothetical, we may be indifferent toward a given business or institution. In principle, we may even support it. But next door, or down the street, it becomes an entirely different matter.

The typically benign suddenly invokes urgency and danger. The shelter for battered women, homeless people, or LGBTQ runaways; the low-income housing development, the food bank, the drug rehab center, the halfway house for registered sex offenders, the strip club, the tattoo parlor, the gun shop, the fast food restaurant.

Anything that threatens a community’s perceived identity, its conscious sense of self, can and often will galvanize “grassroots” resistance.

This defensiveness, or fragility, is a symptom of tribalism. Much to my lefty chagrin, a lot of people tend to be tribal.

And mosques haven’t cornered the religious market on inflaming insecurities. If we consider earlier periods in US history, it was the prospect of a Catholic church, or a Jewish synagogue, or a Mormon temple that could fire-up the mob, incite hysteria, and then instigate organized push-back.

Perhaps no phenomenon has defined local politics and community demographics more so than white flight, the resolve of (mostly) white people not to live near or with (mostly) black people.



Suffice to say, that while anti-mosque activism became more salient post-9/11, anti-blackness has been seared into the DNA of American NIMBYism for centuries.

I want *Obstacle Course* to advance our conversations about religious pluralism. I’m not talking about religious tolerance or religious co-existence. Nor do I want anyone to proselytize or convert to another faith. I’m talking about dynamic interchange and learning. The idea that one can be better at practicing their own faith if they understand and appreciate other faiths.

My video play centers Muslims, their allies, and their adversaries. I wrote it as a Christian Arab American ally and as the husband of a Muslim man. I want it to be a springboard for inquiry about Muslimness within our broader religious landscapes.

Rarely is it acknowledged that Islam has deep and meaningful



Buddhism, secularism and feminism, and with myriad movements for democracy, human rights, and social justice.

When explored, these relationships reveal vigorous religious pluralism.

Finally, I think it important that we interrogate liberal democracy. And I say that as a passionate proponent of liberal democracy. The dangers of majoritarianism and the limits of good intentions remain constant roadblocks to the humanist ideal.

Systems that enshrine basic rights of citizenship, such as freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, and freedom of association, and then subject those rights to referendums, demagoguery, and the vagaries of public opinion, are systems in need of fixing.

The “popular vote” should never decide our civil rights.

When animus towards specific communities is allowed to shape public policies, and sometimes even laws, then the premise and the promise of the liberal state has been contaminated. When democratic processes are used to maintain inequality and injustice, then citizenship becomes precarious, it becomes tiered. Either we’re full citizens or we’re not.

I hope that *Obstacle Course* helps illuminate some of these mendable defects within our political praxis. Scapegoating and “otherizing” are, by definition, antithetical to freedom and liberty.

I believe we can get this right.

February 12, 2019

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Attend a Screening of *Obstacle Course*



Join a Conversation led by Playwright Jamil Khoury

February 21 - 27, 2019

***Obstacle Course*
Premiere Screenings**

Get Your Tickets Today!

Set in Naperville, Illinois, this 45-minute video play, adapted from Jamil Khoury's stage play *Mosque Alert*, explores reactions to a proposed Islamic community center on the site of a beloved landmark. Allyship, municipal politics, and Islamophobia all intersect in this head-on collision between *Not In My Backyard* fear mongering, well-intentioned liberalism, and the peaceful practice of faith.

Screenings will take place at Pierce Hall in the Chicago Temple and will be followed by a lively discussion on the themes and issues surrounding the video play.

Thursday, February 21st at 7pm

Friday, February 22nd at 2pm

Saturday, February 23rd at 2pm

Sunday, February 24th at 2pm

Monday, February 25th at 2pm

Tuesday, February 26th at 7pm

Wednesday, February 27th at 7pm

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