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Racial Profiling Presumes Guilt

Op-Ed by Artistic Director Jamil Khoury
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In the aftermath of Trayvon Martin's slaying and the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman, Americans are yet again face-to-face with our nation's ugly legacy of racial

profiling. At Chicago's Silk Road Rising, that legacy plays out on stage in our Midwest premiere production of Jonas Hassen Khemiri's *INVASION!* An 80-minute full-frontal assault on the racial profiling of Muslim and Arab men, *INVASION!* is a torrent of humor, irony, and self-reflection. And it has certainly sparked controversy.

Theater is, ideally, an arena for inciting discourse and dialogue about the urgent matters of our day. As someone who "immigrated" to theater as an activist, I have trouble understanding those in this sector who separate art from public policy and social change. For Silk Road Rising, the politics are the point. It's about creating art that compels us to ponder, question, debate and act. We believe *INVASION!* does just this for the problem of racial profiling.

Racial profiling operates under the presumed innocence of white people and the presumed guilt of people of color. It establishes tiers of citizenship based solely on appearance. It violates the Constitution's 14th Amendment, which guarantees equal protection under the law. And in addition to being morally and ethically wrong, racial profiling doesn't work. By shifting suspicion from behavior to race, racial profiling syphons limited resources and distracts law enforcement from doing its job. What does work is good old-fashioned police work — tracking suspicious behavior, gathering evidence, collecting testimonies and building partnerships with communities.

Nevertheless, this dangerous and long-discredited practice sure has its proponents, particularly when targeting Muslims, African Americans and immigrants. I believe those proponents are speaking from a place of racial and religious animus, not pragmatic problem-solving (lest we forget the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War). As artistic leader of a playwright-centric theater, I like to think I know something about language and speech. This may explain my resistance to those who couch this conversation within one about "free speech." It's not about the injury and harm caused by racial profiling, it's about the right to be racist. And we use the presumed "sanctity" of "free speech" to defend our right to be racist. The victims of speech matter infinitely less than the "protection" of speech.

The ideology of racial profiling can exist only through the medium of racist speech. Racism is invented by language. American discourse on free speech is notorious for disentangling the so-called exercise of speech from the responsibilities of speech. Our statements have consequences. Islamophobic and anti-Arab speech (in service of racial profiling or otherwise) causes real harm to real people. We all love the adage about fighting bad speech with more speech, but what if no one can hear you? What if fear prevents you from speaking at all? I love the First Amendment, but even the First Amendment does not promise me speech. It protects me from government prosecution after I have spoken. And it was written solely to protect property-owning white males. Period. It's ethical interpretation depends entirely on us.

Jonas Hassen Khemiri's
INVASION!
Directed by
Anna Bahow

PLAYING THROUGH
SEPTEMBER 15th

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SCHEDULE

Thursdays - 7:30pm
Fridays - 8pm
Saturdays - 4pm
Sundays - 4pm

TICKETS

\$30

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VENUE

Chicago Temple Bldg
77 W Washington St

TRANSPORTATION

Close to CTA, RTA & Metra

PARKING

\$8 Parking for Patrons
Self Park
230 W Washington

FEATURING

Kamal Hans
Amira Sabbagh
Omer Abbas Salem
Glenn Stanton

ACCOLADES

"A clever and sometimes-wrenching kaleidoscopic journey through the looking-glass of prejudice." - *Chicago Tribune*

"A blistering commentary on the dangerous power of stereotypes." - *Chicago Theater Beat*

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isn't free. Speech is a commodity. The economics of survival are what determine speech. Speech assumes money and resources and access. We sell, barter, auction, and purchase speech in this country. We then translate that speech into perception and reality. The powerful, high visibility, public proponents of racial profiling know all too well the impact of their speech; as a small theater company with meager resources, we know all too well the limits on our speech. The playing field is nowhere close to level, but we'll grab ourselves some speech whenever and wherever we can. The memory of Trayvon Martin demands it.

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 Historic Chicago Temple Building
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