

Khayaal Theater Company:

Introducing Muslim Theater to Europe

Yasmine Dabbous

Playing against a dramatic backdrop of a map sketched by al-Idrisi, Hassan (Andrew Joshi) and his mother (Samantha Adams) stand about 1.5 meters away from each other. They simultaneously cross their arms across their chests, slightly squeezing themselves as one does to another in an embrace. Together, they tilt their heads to one shoulder then release their arms at the same time.

Hassan, a young Chinese Muslim, had just come back from a long and eventful journey during which he learned about the wisdom of selflessness. His story is one of the four acts making up *Tales from Muslim Lands*, produced by the British *Khayaal* Theater Company.

Established in July 1997, *Khayaal* (Arabic for fantasy) is a small London-based company dedicated to the dramatic interpretation of literature from the Muslim world. It provides wisdom-oriented entertainment for the stage, radio, and television.

“Our aim is to revitalize the human dream of virtue”, Luqman Ali, *Khayaal*’s founder and artistic director, said. “Revolving around this central objective are numerous other socio-cultural aims including those of promoting intercultural understanding and demonstrating reconciliation between Muslims and non-Muslims” (L. Ali, personal communication, March 10, 2007).

Khayaal’s plays are directed in a popularly accessible and appealing way. They often make their audiences laugh and always make them think about their humanity.

The poignant symbolic embrace between Hassan and his mother epitomizes *Khayaal*’s approach

to theatrical performance as the company strives to present refined artistic expression without compromising the teachings of Islamic *shari’a*.

“We take the principles of the *shari’a* very seriously in all of our work but not in a dogmatic way”, Ali, a second-generation African-American Muslim, said. “It is more about an ethos or a respect for the spirit and intent of the *shari’a*” (L. Ali, personal communication, March 10, 2007).

A central point in this regard is the female performer. Often based on the 31st verse of *Surat Annour*, Muslim religious scholars commonly condemn and forbid female performance. The verse translates as follows:

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands’ fathers, their sons, their husbands’ sons, their brothers or their brothers’ sons, or their sisters’ sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye believers! Turn ye all together towards Allah, that ye may attain bliss. (*Qur’an* 24:31)

But female performers in Islamic countries like Malaysia and Indonesia do exist. Most Randai

and Sijobang troops, for example, have replaced male impersonators of female roles with female actresses. Some justify their position by citing the *hadith* where Prophet Mohamed refrained his companion Abu Bakr from silencing two young female singers performing for his daughter Aisha.

Ali provides another explanation. Islamic texts, he said, are addressing the types of female performances based on the promotion of sexual impropriety and exploitation. "They should not be interpreted in such a way as to suggest prohibition of all female performance whatever the nature and circumstance of the performance", he continued (L. Ali, personal communication, March 10, 2007).

Although many of them are non-Muslim, *Khayaal* actresses always observe on stage the modesty mandated by Islam. The costumes of female characters reflect the boundaries imposed by the *Qur'an*. Touching between genders is avoided as much as possible, as in the case of Hassan's symbolic embrace of his mother.

"The parameters in which we have to work as Muslims actually challenge us to employ our imagination in ways which we believe enhance our work rather than detract from it", Ali said (L. Ali, personal communication, March 10, 2007).

Eleanor Martin, Ali's wife and a founding member and associate director of *Khayaal*, explained that the role of women is integral to the company's work. "In these times, Muslims cannot afford to eliminate the contribution of women from any areas of society", she said (E. Martin, personal communication, March 12, 2007).

A professional British actress who converted to



Eleanor Martin in *The Truth about Your Father*

Islam in 1996, Martin said, *Khayaal* provides her with the opportunity to pursue her career without compromising her faith. "It would be very hard for a Muslim woman to make a living as an actress in mainstream theater", she said (E. Martin, personal communication, March 12, 2007).

Martin's most recent performance with *Khayaal* was in *The Truth About Your Father*, where she plays the wife of a suicide bomber. The only performer in the play, Martin recounts classic Muslim stories to her son Jihad, helping him confront his father's hideous act. The play is meant to send a message of peace and tolerance and to bridge the gap between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Martin observes the Islamic *hijab* and, when she works with male members of the group, she does so in the presence of her husband or of another female. "The actors we work with, although not always Muslim, are very respectful of my beliefs", Martin said (E. Martin, personal communication, March 12, 2007).

Most Muslim scholars who were exposed to *Khayaal*'s work showed their support for the concept. Muslim audiences also expressed their admiration and enthusiasm about the project. In fact, *Khayaal* won the very first Muslim News Alhambra Award for Excellence in the Arts in 2000.

On one occasion, *Khayaal* performed at a fundraising evening where the audience included members of the strict Wahabi tradition. *Khayaal* directors warned their cast – most of which were non-Muslim – not to expect applause after the show. To their amazement, however, the whole audience burst into a spontaneous ovation. “So many of the people in the room that night would never have dreamt of setting foot in a theater”, Martin said. “We gave them a theatrical experience which demonstrated how theater and its power can be used for a higher purpose” (E. Martin, personal communication, March 12, 2007).

The most difficult challenge *Khayaal* faces is financial. When the company was first established in Ali and Martin’s apartment in southeast London, the couple did not have the resources to sustain a theatrical group and decided to make it a charitable company. But the concept of a theatrical corporation was too far a leap for many Muslim donors. Most did not believe that it warrants investment or financial support.

Khayaal’s first performance, Fariduddin Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds*, was launched in May 1998, almost a year after the company was established. Actors, hired on a freelance basis, worked for a little more than the cost of their travel and lunch expenses. Indeed, *Khayaal* faced numerous hardships that almost prevented the dream from materializing.

“In many ways, the struggles and trials that were involved in the process mirrored the storyline of the

play”, Ali said. “We felt that we had experienced the reality of the author’s work and teachings” (L. Ali, personal communication, March 10, 2007).

Nine years later, *Khayaal* still faces the same hardships. Actors are hired on a project basis and many of the full-time staff operate as volunteers. Ali finds himself obliged to work as a writer, translator, editor, lecturer, and freelance imam – in addition to his job with *Khayaal* – in order to sustain his family.

But despite the challenge, *Khayaal* continues to grow, narrating virtuous and often comical stories of the Muslim world and attracting strong British and international acclaim. More importantly, it stands out in providing a tolerant message of Islam to the Western world and in reintroducing the theater to the Muslim culture.

“People forget that before the Prophet Mohamed played the roles of statesman, warrior, judge, and legislator, he was a supreme storyteller who captured the imagination of his audiences with a vision of a dream of virtue for humanity”, Ali said. “This function was of such importance that Allah commands the Prophet [in the *Qur’an*] to ‘relate the stories so that they will reflect’” (L. Ali, personal communication, March 10, 2007).

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