

BY ALEXIS SOLOSKI

B.A.M. WELCOMES SUMMER WITH A MUSLIM VERSION OF *RICHARD III*

TYRANT IN THE SAND

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *RICHARD III* OPENS WITH THE seasonal observation, "Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer." It's much too soon to predict if this summer—and its theatrical offerings—will prove at all glorious.

But Sulayman Al-Bassam's provocative play *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* will heat up the Brooklyn Academy of Music stage when it opens on June 9.

Al-Bassam's *Richard III*—part of BAM's Muslim Voices: Arts & Ideas Festival—begins differently from Shakespeare's: Its first lines are not spoken by Richard and don't concern the weather. Instead, they emerge from the mouth of Queen Margaret, a black-robed woman who crosses the stage while thrusting bloodied clothing into a suitcase. "I am Margaret," she tells the audience. "You needn't be concerned about me—we lost. It is your right to ignore me. I would ignore myself if my history let me."

Al-Bassam does not ignore any of Shakespeare's characters. His version echoes Shakespeare's language and structure, while relocating the story to the contemporary Middle East and reflecting an Arab milieu. Clarence quotes from the Koran; other characters refer to rosewater, henna, kohl, camels, jinn. Controversially, Al-Bassam has pictured the devilish Richard not as a deformed creature, but as a forceful man in military dress. Parallels to Saddam Hussein are somewhat intended; Al-Bassam had originally titled the piece *The Baghdad Richard*.

The child of a Kuwaiti father and British mother, Al-Bassam, now 36, spent his early youth in Kuwait and his teens and twenties in Europe, eventually returning to Kuwait in 2002. While in London, he founded the Zaoum Theatre Company and created work exploring "relations between identity and modernity with significant reference to Kuwait, to the Gulf, to the Arab world." His *Al-Hamlet Summit*, which

featured Ophelia as a suicide bomber, attracted the notice of the Royal Shakespeare Company, who asked him to create a production of *Richard III* to run alongside a more traditional rendering in their Complete Works Festival.

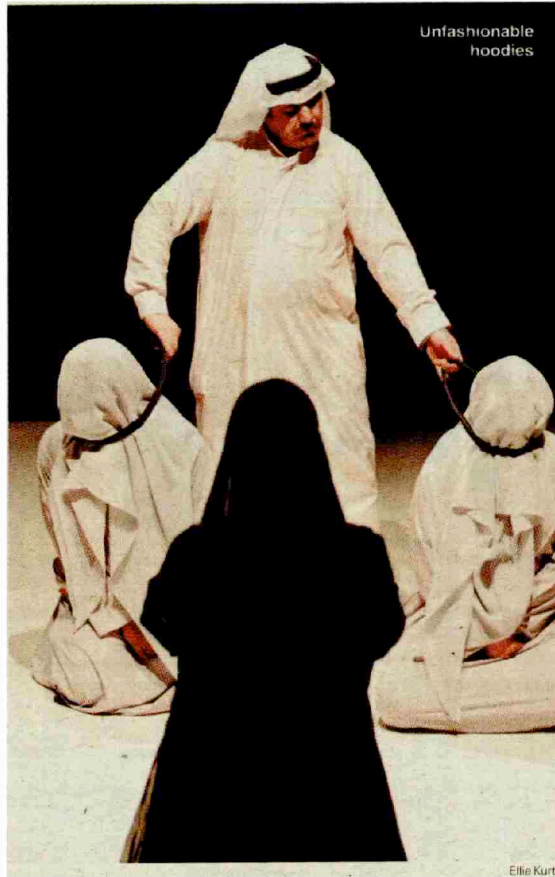
Initially, Al-Bassam said, "It seemed to me a neat arrangement that *Richard III* could be used as a hook for an exploration of... the Saddam biography, Baathist Iraq, the rise and fall." As work progressed, though, he discarded that original

impulse: "It seemed to be oversimplifying both histories"—Richard III's and Saddam Hussein's—to try and combine them. For the 2007 RSC premiere, he expanded the play's concerns and altered its setting: The language, costumes, music, and performers drew from regions as diverse as Syria, Lebanon, Kuwait, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

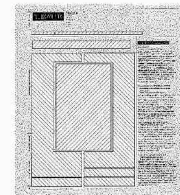
Though Al-Bassam weakened the analogues to Iraq, a play that portrays the Arab characters as either helpless victims or vile perpetrators makes it a challenging choice for a festival celebrating "Muslim Voices." Margaret Litvin, a professor of Arabic and comparative literature at Boston University who has written on Al-Bassam's work, says that in his *Richard III*—even more so than in Shakespeare's—"Everyone has blood on their hands. Everyone is trapped in a historical cycle... There's no decent politics here." She also worries that Western audiences might miss the piece's satirical elements. But BAM's Joseph Melillo,

who selected the production for inclusion, doesn't seem concerned, insisting, "I searched for a universal story told within the Muslim context and found it in this production of *Richard III*."

Richard III: An Arab Tragedy attracted almost universal acclaim while touring through Europe and the Middle East, and audiences have varied widely. The actors have performed for Stratford's Shakespeare purists, a gathering of elite women in



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the United Arab Emirates, and a Damascus crowd that included Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad. "That was an interesting evening," says Al-Bassam, with some understatement. The potentate "seemed to enjoy" it. That's fortunate: If ever a play discussed the dangers of displeasing a leader, it's *Richard III*.

June 9–12, BAM Harvey Theater, 651 Fulton Street, Brooklyn, bam.org