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OPINION | THEATER REVIEW

'Noura' Review: The Weight of Being Erased

A family of Iraqi Catholics who have fled to America can't escape their past in Heather Raffo's drama set in New York at Christmas.



By
Terry

Teachout

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Liam Campora and Heather Raffo PHOTO: JOAN MARCUS

New York

Identity is the hottest topic in American theater these days, just as immigration is the hottest topic in American politics. But Heather Raffo's "Noura," a drama about a family of Iraqi Catholics who have fled to America to escape the "medieval madmen" (as one character calls them) who now rule their native land, is nothing like the issue-driven, stridently politicized

plays about these subjects with which our stages are currently clogged. While "Noura" is palpably political, it preaches no sermons, nor will it send you home inspired to do anything in particular. Instead, Ms. Raffo has given us a *human* drama, the searing story of five people who find themselves caught between the pulverizing grindstones of politics and religion. If it's propaganda you seek, go elsewhere—but should you do so, you'll miss one of the finest new plays I've ever reviewed in this space.

Noura

Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St.
\$49-\$89, 212-279-4200, closes Dec. 30

"Noura" takes place at Christmas in the New York apartment where the title character (played with attention-seizing magnetism by Ms. Raffo) lives with Tim (Nabil Elouahabi) and Alex (Liam Campora), her husband and young son. Having given up everything to free themselves from the brutal tyranny of ISIS, Noura and her family are now American citizens who are determined, in Tim's hopeful words, to "reinvent ourselves" in "a place [where] we can

forget,” so much so that Tim and Alex have changed their names from Tareq and Yazen. At home, they speak only English so that Alex “won’t grow up sounding like a foreigner,” and the Christmas tree that is the only visible touch of warmth in their austere contemporary-looking flat (“It’s empty—I mean modern”) is also a symbol of their determination to flourish in a strange land. But Tim is kidding himself when he says that “I feel safe for the first time in my life”: Nothing can be truly safe from the effects of Western modernity, least of all a family of Iraqi émigrés, and the arrival of two visitors from home (Dahlia Azama and Matthew David) touches off a train of powder that by play’s end will blow up their seemingly settled lives.

As is hinted by the title, “Noura” is, like Lucas Hnath’s “A Doll’s House, Part 2,” a variation on Ibsen’s 1879 tale of the feminist liberation of Nora Helmer. Noura is no less desperate to free herself from the dead hand of the past, crushed as she is by “the weight of being erased. Of not belonging anymore. Anywhere.” But whereas Mr. Hnath’s “sequel” to “A Doll’s House” is both parasitical and predictable—not to mention smug—Ms. Raffo has given us a free-standing, fully independent work of art, one which acknowledges that there can be no easy answers for Noura, much less her family, as she seeks to negotiate the thin ice of American life while simultaneously mourning the loss of the “dying identity” with which she admits to being “obsessed.” Hers is the exile’s fate, to be neither one thing nor the other, and part of the dark beauty of “Noura” is that it shows us what she stands to lose by setting sail on the sea of freedom.

“Noura” is full of unexpected revelations and flashes of sudden, blinding illumination. Time and again, Ms. Raffo’s characters casually tell us things that open our eyes to the tragic complexity of their lives, sometimes in passing (“The neighbor was paid to burn every book on our street. And he did it”) and sometimes in unostentatiously eloquent speeches that stick tight to your memory. What is it like to speak English yet feel in Arabic? Noura tells us: “This dinner—in Arabic, how different would it be? Circling each other for hours. Gossip thickening underneath each word. In Arabic we wait, we dance, but English doesn’t dance, it flies like an arrow.”



Nabil Elouahabi, Liam Campora, Heather Raffo and Matthew David PHOTO: JOAN MARCUS

Ms. Raffo first came to my attention in 2005 with “Nine Parts of Desire,” a one-woman play of the highest quality in which she portrayed nine refugees from Iraq whose real-life models she had interviewed and whom she brought to life with startling precision. Since then, though, I’d neither seen nor heard anything

of her, and it is a joy to report that “Noura” is as fine as its predecessor. So, too, is this off-Broadway production, directed with supreme assurance by Joanna Settle, performed on a set elegantly designed by Andrew Lieberman and acted by a cast whose other members are worthy of the galvanizing challenge of sharing a stage with the charismatic Ms. Raffo.

This production, which originated at Washington’s Shakespeare Theater Company, deserves to move to Broadway. Alas, it closes at Playwrights Horizons on Dec. 30, so see it there while you can.

—*Mr. Teachout*, the *Journal’s* drama critic, is the author, most recently, of “Billy and Me.” Write to him at tteachout@wsj.com.

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