

'Invasion!': A play on words

PLANET ANT PRODUCTION TAKES INSIGHTFUL LOOK AT HOW THE ARAB WORLD IS VIEWED

By John Monaghan
Special to the Detroit Free Press

The title may bring to mind a 1950s B-movie, but "Invasion!" at Planet Ant Theatre is actually a thoughtful, often goofy examination of a made-up word and its role in the way the Arab world is viewed, both by others and by itself.

That word, "abulkasem," is derived from Abu Kasem, the name of an "Arabian Nights" character. "Invasion!" opens with a scene from that ancient story, and it's delivered

in a dramatic fashion that's heavy on gesture and romantic dialogue.

Two young men in the audience aren't having it. They heckle the show before taking over the stage and pulling down sheets from white walls to reveal spray-painted symbols of protest. Though they hate the play, they like the sound of abulkasem and so use the word to fit any occasion.

Four actors play 25 or so roles as abulkasem goes viral, especially among Arab males. When uttered with the proper

inflection, the word can be used as proper noun ("Yo, Abulkasem"), a verb ("Don't try to abulkasem me") or an adjective ("Dude, that song is so abulkasem.")

At one point, the word is attached to a mysterious man whose motives are examined by various experts on TV, much like the ones who currently try to explain the complexities of the Middle East. Meanwhile, limited props and costumes help actress Linnæ Caurdy change from a woman who has abulkasem used on her as a pickup line to a grad-

uate student who tries to impress her university colleagues with a faux knowledge of modern writers. ("You mean you haven't read Abulkasem?")

All members of the ensemble prove equally adept at changing characters on a dime. Samer Ajluni has two of the most moving scenes, first as Uncle Abulkasem, a visiting Lebanese man who is unaware that his American friends ridicule him behind his back. Later, he plays an immigrant whose rah-rah views of Western popular

culture are incorrectly translated as a deadly screed against all things American.

At its best, the play is about the elasticity of language and the ways a culture can be falsely interpreted. It offers endless opportunities for the actors (Artun Kircali and Emilio Rodriguez complete the cast) to play with characters over 70 intermission-free minutes.

The origins of "Invasion!" are almost as convoluted as the play. Playwright Jonas Hassen Khemiri, born to a Tunisian father and Swedish mother, saw his debut work produced in Stockholm in 2006 before an English translation (by Rachel Wilson-Broyles) came to the U.S.

about five years later, earning strong reviews and an Obie Award in 2011.

The play is a perfect fit for the tiny Planet Ant performance space. As directed by Molly McMahon, it is funny, insightful and just experimental enough to be challenging. As one of its characters might say, this show is 100% abulkasem.

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'Invasion!'

★★★
out of four stars
Planet Ant Theatre
2357 Caniff,
Hamtramck
8 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 2 p.m.
Sun. Through Dec. 20
313-365-4948
www.planetant.com
\$10-\$20

MICHAEL HOVITCH
From left: Linnæ Caurdy, Artun Kircali, Samer Ajluni and Emilio Rodriguez in Planet Ant Theatre's production of "Invasion!"

