

Lara Week, La Mama & Critical Stages Touring Present

THEM

BY SAMAH SABAWI

DIRECTED BY BAGRYANA POPOV

★★★★

"A drama dappled with
humanity and humour"

- SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

★★★★★

"Perhaps the most
important piece of theatre
you will see this year"

- THE MUSIC



LARA WEEK, LA MAMA, AND CRITICAL STAGES TOURING

present

THEM

AUSTRALIAN TOUR

July-August 2021

Riverlinks, Shepparton
Bunjil Place, Narre Warren
Capital Theatre, Bendigo
Arts Centre Melbourne

Written by **Samah Sabawi**

Director **Bagryana Popov**

Producer and Set & Costume Designer **Lara Week**

Sound Designer **Elissa Goodrich**

Lighting Designer & Touring Production Manager **Shane Grant**

Prop Maker **Lara Chamas**

Stage & Production Manager **Hayley Fox**

Performers

Osamah Sami, Taj Aldeeb, Mehran Tajbakhsh, Claudia Greenstone, Nahed Elrayes, and Sahil Saluja

For Critical Stages Touring

CEO & Director **Chris Bendall**

Senior Producer **Melanie Carolan**

Programming Producer **Emma Corrick**

Marketing and Engagment **Robbi James**

Creative Producer **Bernadette Fam**

Production Supervisor **Judy Reardon**

Finance Manager **Kylie Richards**

The producers would like to acknowledge the premiere production was rehearsed and performed on the sovereign lands of the people of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respect to Elders of this country, past and present.



Critical
Stages
Touring



LA MAMA

CREATIVE VICTORIA



Australian Government
RISE Fund



LA TROBE
UNIVERSITY



Australian Government

Australia
Council
for the Arts



The Russell Mills Foundation
does.
Experiences.
Humanity.

This project was supported by Creative Victoria, La Trobe University, The Russell Mills Foundation, and the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, and the Restart Investment to Sustain and Expand (RISE) Fund – an Australian Government initiative

WRITER'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the legendary Liz Jones, to the remarkable powerhouse Caitlin Dullard, and to all the staff of La Mama for providing us with a space to create, to express, and to belong. You embraced this work when bigger theatres saw it as 'risky' and 'not commercially viable.' You held up my art and helped me to stage stories that we know we can no longer ignore. Here we are now, in our second season, having proved that there is an appetite for our stories, and finally finding our way into bigger spaces. None of this would be happening if not for your heart and courage! Thank you La Mama.

Thank you Tim Stitz, Daniel Clark, and everybody else at Arts Centre Melbourne who championed this production. And thank you to Chris Bendall and the team at Critical Stages Touring for all your work to see it has a longer life.

Big hugs and kisses to producer, designer and friend Lara Week for organizing the very first reading of this work in her home and for her tireless work on this production since. Lara's calmness, talent and wisdom has been a guiding strength for me in all my theatre work. Love you Lara!

Gratitude and love to Bagryana Popov; I'm so blessed to have you direct this important work. Watching you in action, directing the cast with focus, love, tenderness, firmness, humour, seriousness and so much compassion has become one of my favourite things-to-do. I am in playwright-director relationship heaven.

Big love to the premiere cast of THEM: Priscilla Doueihy, Abdulrahman Hammoud, Claudia Greenstone, Khisraw Jones-Shukoor, Reece Vella and Nahed Elrayes. It was a real pleasure and honour to see you perform my characters in the opening season, and to see you do it so well! Thank you also Lara Chamas, Hayley Fox, Shane Grant and Elissa Goodrich for all your work in bringing this play to life.

Thank you to James Crafti for putting on a public reading of the first draft; and for going the distance by collecting written audience feedback which was very helpful for me when polishing and workshoping the script.

A huge thank you to Chris Mead for the many dramaturgical interventions and the long hours of working through the text with me, and for inviting me to be part of Melbourne Theatre Company's Cybec Electric program, giving this work its final public reading, and further opportunity to develop and grow. Thank you!

A special thank you to my friend Hana Assafiri for all that you do for social justice in our beautiful city Melbourne, and for your faith in this work and your extraordinary support.

My infinite love to Monir, who never tires of my artistic adventures and to my family and friends who are too many to name, for their love, patience, and support.

Most important of all, thank you to those who shared with me their refugee and war stories. I hope this work honours your experiences of pain and dispossession.

To my cousin Lobna in Gaza, I owe you my inspiration for this work. Thank you for all the tears and laughter.

—Samah Sabawi
1 June 2021

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

This play is set in an unnamed war zone in the Middle East, but the damage to people's lives could happen in any war. The casualty in war is normal human life.

In the media we see images of people fleeing war zones as an anonymous mass. In Samah Sabawi's play we meet Leila, Omar, Salma, Mohamed and Majid as people we know—imperfect, real; people with a name and a story, people striving to live a normal life, to work, to study, to raise a family, and then, in war, striving to survive. People we could love. They could be us. We could be them.

When I first read the script, I loved its humour, honesty and power. What also inspired me was the writer's pledge to 'collaborate with artists from diverse backgrounds in the realization and presentation of the work.' I am happy that the artistic team represents a range of cultural and religious backgrounds. I consider this a wonderful aspect of Australia—our capacity to live and work together with openness and respect.

It has been an honour and a joy to collaborate with Samah Sabawi to bring her play to production. My sincere thanks to her, the creative team, the cast of the 2017 creative development, the cast of the first season at La Mama Courthouse in 2019, La Mama for presenting the work, and La Trobe University for their support.

Everyone has worked with generosity, heart, commitment, openness and care. It has been wonderful to bring this play to fruition and to share it with audiences. My thanks to Arts Centre Melbourne and Critical Stages for presenting this second season in 2021. We are thrilled that this moving, human play can reach more people. It is a story worth telling.

We cannot stop the bombs from falling, but by performing this play we can say 'people have a right to live in peace and safety.' And we can remind ourselves that refugees are people like us, who are seeking a normal life. Many refugees are suffering in Australian detention centres.

It is my urgent and sincere hope that they will be allowed to settle in Australia and to begin new lives in safety.

—Bagryana Popov
1 June 2021



SAMAH SABAWI

WRITER

Samah Sabawi is an author, playwright, scholar, commentator and poet who wages 'beautiful resistance' through her art and work. A recipient of multiple awards both nationally and internationally, Dr Sabawi's theatre credits include the critically acclaimed plays *Tales of a City by the Sea* and *THEM*. She is co-editor of *Double Exposure: Plays of the Jewish and Palestinian Diasporas*, winner of the Patrick O'Neill award and co-author of *I Remember My Name: Poetry by Samah Sabawi, Ramzy Baroud and Jehan Bseiso*, winner of the Palestine Book Award. Her poems are published in magazines and books including West End Press' *With Our Eyes Wide Open: Poems of the New American Century* and Just World Books' *Gaza Unsilenced!* Dr Sabawi is host of the webinar/podcast series *The Book Room*. She received her PhD from Victoria University for her thesis titled *Inheriting Exile, transgenerational trauma and the Palestinian Australian Identity*.



BAGRYANA POPOV

DIRECTOR

Bagryana Popov is an award-winning theatre artist who works in an interdisciplinary way. She has collaborated with acclaimed professional artists, students and communities, working as director, actor, dramaturg and performance maker. Much of her work has examined themes of displacement and trauma as a result of war: *Subclass 26A*, *Studies in Being Human*, *Cafe Scheherezade*, *Sarajevo Suite* and *Of Cows, Women and War*, co-created with Ajak Kwai. Internationally, Dr Popov has directed for the National Theatre of Macedonia, presented work in Finland and performed in Bulgaria and Hungary. She completed her PhD in performance through University of Melbourne. Her project *Uncle Vanya*, a site-specific, durational version of Chekhov's early environmentalist play transposed to

the Australian landscape, was presented as part of the Adelaide Festival 2019 at The Cedars, the estate of artist Hans Heysen. Dr Popov is a lecturer and researcher in theatre at La Trobe University, Melbourne.



LARA WEEK

SET & COSTUMER DESIGNER,
PRODUCER

Lara Week is a designer for performance and creative producer. From 2011, Lara was associate producer for Tribal Soul Arts, working with Patrice Naiambana to produce decolonial arts programs and performances in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, the Netherlands, UK, and Australia. In 2019 she produced and designed the sell-out premiere season of *THEM* at La Mama Courthouse. Other design credits include *The Cane* (Red Stitch Actors Theatre), *ANNA* (La Mama Courthouse), *Make Me A Hour* (La Mama Courthouse), *Caliban* (Western Edge Youth Arts, Malthouse Theatre), *3 Sisters* (Metanoia Theatre), *South Sudan Voice* (Free Theatre), *Night Sings Its Songs* (La Mama Theatre), and two seasons of Samah Sabawi's award-winning play *Tales Of A City By The Sea* (La Mama Courthouse) which she co-produced in 2016 with Daniel Clark and toured to Adelaide, Sydney, and Kuala Lumpur.



SHANE GRANT

LIGHTING DESIGNER

Shane has been acknowledged as an "Absolute Genius" (Theatre People, 30/7/16) for his lighting design of Sarah Kane's *4:48 Psychosis*. Shane earned a Bachelor of Arts (Performing Arts) from the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne University, some time ago! Shane has: toured the world; operated venues (Gasworks, Mechanics Institute Brunswick, St Martins); written shows; performed shows; sold tickets to shows; produced shows; sold drinks in the foyer at shows;

built sets; built theatres; and given the St Crispin's Day speeches that get everyone over the line on opening night—sometimes all with the same production. Some recent notable shows that Shane has designed are: Samah Sabawi's *Tales of a City by the Sea* (La Mama Courthouse and tour), *Underground* (Gasworks Theatre), *Scream Bloody Murder* (Abbotsford Convent), *The Omission of the Coleman Family* (Metanoia Theatre at the Mechanic's Institute), *Toorak Rules* (St Martins Theatre), *Last Words* (Kadimah Cultural Centre) and *Hotel Sorrento* (national tour).



ELISSA GOODRICH

SOUND DESIGNER

Elissa Goodrich is a musician, sound artist & composer with an abiding interest in contemporary music across idioms & collaborative arts-making. She has collaborated with Bagryana Popov on independent theatre projects since 1998. Elissa's sound-art works include *Between Footsteps* (2016 – 2020, Heide Museum of Modern Art), and have played in festivals across Europe and Australia. Elissa co-led world-jazz Shannon-Goodrich Ensemble with two nominations for Australian Jazz Work of the Year. In 2017, she performed her work *Forgotten Songs of Flight* with cellist Caerwen Martin at the National Opera Center (New York, USA). Elissa is currently composing a large-scale work *Gene Tree: Listen.Now.Again.* in partnership with St Martins and The Royal Botanical Gardens Melbourne, with a composer's commission from the prestigious APRA AMCOS Art Music Fund 2018-2022. Her latest work *The Waves Project* is in partnership with Professor Richard Manasseh's "Surf Sounds" ARC climate science project (Swinburne University), supported by Australia Council for the Arts and Creative Victoria.



LARA CHAMAS

PROP MAKER

Lara Chamas is a Lebanese-Australian artist based in Narm (Melbourne). Fleeing civil war, her parents migrated to Australia, where she was born. Lara's practice investigates postcolonial and migrant narratives within the context of her cultural identity, using both humorous and poetic notions. Through narrative and experience documentation, storytelling, transgenerational trauma and memory and tacit knowledge, her research explores meeting points between narrative theory, cultural practice, current political and societal tensions, and the body as a political vessel. Lara's work has been exhibited widely including at Gertrude Contemporary, Warrnambool Art Gallery, KINGS Artist Run, Bus Projects, West Space, The Substation, Incinerator Gallery, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Photo Access, May Space, at Wagga Wagga Art Gallery and Griffith Regional Gallery as part of the National Emerging Art Glass Prize, as well as in Ramallah, Palestine, during a residency. Lara had eight years of community theatre experience before working on the premiere season of *THEM* at La Mama Theatre.



HAYLEY FOX

STAGE MANAGER

Hayley Fox completed a Diploma of Live Production and a Master of Arts in 2012. Since graduating, Hayley has stage and production managed throughout Melbourne and regional Victoria and interstate. Hayley now spends her days as Venue Manager for La Mama Theatre and moonlights as a technician at Chapel off Chapel, operating for shows such as *Dolly Diamond's Blankety Blanks* and *Britney Spears the Cabaret*. In 2016, Hayley was the Production Manager for Samah Sabawi's *Tales of a City by the Sea*, which she toured to Adelaide and Sydney.



TAJ ALDEEB

PERFORMER - LEILA

Taj Aldeeb is a musician and performer. She fell in love with the performing arts in early childhood, taking part in the international Solhi-al-wadi Academy Piano Competition, and training at the National Ballet Academy in her hometown in Syria. In 2014, Taj fled the Syrian war with her family and settled in Melbourne/Narrm. Motivated by her own journey, Taj is committed to telling stories that demonstrate the challenges, triumphs, and diverse experiences of forced migration. She has played lead roles in the short films *Nour* (2018, dir. Suzy Sainovski) and *The Fall* (2019, dir. Mert Berdilek), which was a finalist in its category at Sydney and İzmir Kisa Film Festivals. Taj also employs her talents as a storyteller in advocacy work for human rights, leading multiple projects for not-for-profit organisations Road to Refuge and Red Cross, and giving talks for the community.



OSAMAH SAMI

PERFORMER - OMAR

Osamah Sami is the star and writer behind the hit Australian film *Ali's Wedding*, co-written with Andrew Knight (Hacksaw Ridge, The Water Diviner), under the helm of award-winning director Jeffrey Walker. For his portrayal of the titular character, Osamah received AACTA Award, FCCA Award and AFCA Award nominations for Best Lead Actor. On stage, Osamah performed in sold-out seasons of *Good Muslim Boy*, his adaptation of his NSW Premier's Literary Award-winning memoir of the same name, at Malthouse Theatre and Queensland Theatre. He has also performed at Belvoir St. Theatre Company Sydney, Browns Mart Theatre Darwin, Heath Ledger Theatre Perth, La Mama Theatre, Playhouse Theatre, and Melbourne Theatre Company. His role as Amor in Swedish playwright's Jonas Khmeiri's *I Call My Brothers* at the MTC earned him a Green Room Award nomination for Best Lead Actor..



CLAUDIA GREENSTONE

PERFORMER - SALMA

Claudia Greenstone is a theatre and film actress passionate about projects that give voice to stories of marginalised people in society. Over the years, Claudia has been blessed to work with some of Australia's best and most exciting directors. Television credits include her recurring role as Victoria Lamb on *Neighbours* and roles on *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, *Upper Middle Bogan*, *Wentworth*, *Offspring*, *Killing Time* and *Satisfaction*. Some of Claudia's favourite theatre roles include Salma in *THEM*, Anna in *Closer*, Helena in *Look Back in Anger* and Dove in *Features of Blown Youth*. One of her most memorable film roles was playing a Serbian refugee, Antonija in the short SBS film *Continental Drift*, set in Croatia. Another was playing the lead, Ana, an Argentinian single mum, in the multiple award-winning short film, *El Niño*, seen at many local and international festivals



SAHIL SALUJA

PERFORMER - MOHAMED

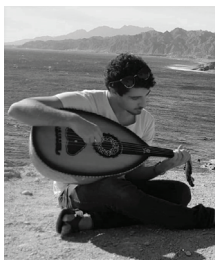
Sahil studied his craft in India, America, and Australia. For his work in Declan Furber Gillick's *Bighouse Dreaming* (directed by Mark Wilson), he and the cast won Best Performance and Best Ensemble respectively at the Melbourne Fringe Festival, and the Green Room Awards. He toured in *Anthem*, a collaboration from Andrew Bovell, Christos Tsiolkas, Melissa Reeves and Patricia Cornelius. Previous stage credits include *North Pool* (Lab Theatre Company's); *Prehistoric* (Elbow Room); *Melbourne Talam* (MTC); *The Way Out* (Red Stitch); *Emma's House Special* (Spare Productions); and *A Long Way Home* (MTC). Sahil has trained at MTC, VCA, The University of Michigan and Second City in Chicago. Sahil trained as a Bollywood dancer and performs with Jalwa Dance Company. Additionally, he performed his stand-up comedy show *The Late Night Show* at Melbourne International Comedy Festival.



MEHRAN TAJBAKHSH

PERFORMER - MAJID

Mehran Tajbakhsh was born in Iran and came to Australia with his family in 2015. He settled into Australian life in rural NSW and moved to Melbourne by himself after a year of hard work. While studying Business, he developed a love for performing and telling stories. Mehran's passion for theatre and film was developed further over recent years by being surrounded by the arts of Melbourne. He began his formal training at Federation University in 2018, where he was fortunate to work with Peta Hanrahan on *Twelve Angry Jurors* (Juror 7), *Everyman* directed by Kellie Tori, *Embers* (Politician 2 and CFA Vol) directed by Kim Durban, and *Out of Joint* (Claudius) directed by Melanie Beddie. Mehran looks forward to expanding his acting career, creating his own movie company, and becoming a film director. Mehran speaks fluent Persian and plays the piano.



NAHED ELRAYES

PERFORMER - PIANO MAN

Nahed Elrayes is an emerging Palestinian-Australian composer and writer. Through the competitive Margaret Schofield Prize in Composition, Nahed attended the ANU School of Music, writing for various ensembles and co-founding Limited Express and Azim Zain and His Lovely Bones. After obtaining a BMus and B.PPE (Politics Philosophy and Economics) from the ANU, Nahed went to Cairo in 2018 to study Arabic music theory, which he has since applied to his performance and composition style. Nahed's 2020 thesis on Lebanese historical sociology won the University of Melbourne's W.M. Ball Prize for best graduate essay in International Relations. Nahed is currently working on his first piano concerto, a novel called *The Crossing*, and a music video based on Mahmoud Darwish's *Ashiq Min Filastin*, in collaboration with dozens of musicians and crew from Melbourne to Gaza.

ADDITIONAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The creative team would like to acknowledge the generous contribution of those who helped to shape the script, and this production, during its two periods of creative development: Asha Khan, Claude Jabbour, Ange Arabatzsis, Aseel Tayah, and Rachel Pitt Lancaster at La Trobe University in 2017 (directed by Bagryana Popov); and Jean Bachoura, Sun Park, Mark Coles-Smith, Maggie Naouri, Tahlee Fereday, and Rohan Mirchandaney, directed by Luke Kerridge, under the dramaturgy of Chris Mead and Jennifer Medway as part of Melbourne Theatre Company's Cybec Electric program in 2018.

MUSIC & SOUND CREDITS

LIVE MUSIC WORKS FROM

Shiddo el Hemme: Words and music by **Marcel Khalife**

Sahar El Layaly: Music by **Fairuz**

Marwan's Waltz (2019): By **Nahed Elrayes**

Breeze: Music by **Marcel Khalife**

Raja'ain ya Hawa: Words and music by **Rahbani Brothers**

SAMPLED RECORDED ARTISTS

Azan (call to prayer) voice: **Anon**

Spoken Voice: **Priscilla Doueihy, Claudia Greenstone, Abdulrahman Hammoud, Khriraw Jones-Shukoor, and Reece Vella**

Whistler: **Nahed Elrayes, Raja'ain ya Hawa**, melody by **Fairuz**

Piano and percussion: **Elissa Goodrich**

Body percussion: **Abdulrahman Hammoud**

LEARN MORE

We encourage you to learn more about the stories of asylum seekers in Australia. Since 2012, **Road to Refuge** has been on a mission to change the conversation on seeking refuge and asylum in Australia. They provide a platform to amplify the voices and perspectives of those with lived experience of seeking asylum.

Please discover their work at www.roadtorefuge.com

CRITICAL STAGES TOURING

Critical Stages Touring is Australia's national touring theatre company – discovering and developing outstanding independent theatre for audiences everywhere.

We create live performing arts experiences that can travel, connecting these with diverse regional communities, and fostering a sustainable and diverse national independent theatre sector. The company has been supporting artists and audiences around Australia since 2006, extending the life of great independent theatre productions through touring and audience development. Over that time, we have partnered with a strong and ambitious pool of independent artists and earned a reputation for excellent service with presenters.

Our work was recognised by the Australia Council, with the company one of only four nationally to be awarded National Touring Status from 2018-2021. We were awarded the highly prestigious Touring Legend Drover's Award by Performing Arts Connections (PAC) Australia in 2019.

We contribute to building a strong and vibrant theatre culture through supporting theatre makers and creatives in their own development. We produce regular forums and industry initiatives that bring them together, start and continue vital conversations, and provide opportunity to connect with each other and share knowledge and resources.

Critical Stages Touring brings together people from across the country to connect with original Australian stories and theatrical works in the venues and places they hold dear. Through touring to an ever-expanding network of locations in regional, remote and rural Australia, and now also throughout New Zealand. We ensure that audiences can experience diverse & innovative professional live performance where they live. With the launch of our digital theatre platform, the CST Screening Room, we can now bring these same outstanding artists and shows into the homes and devices of audiences anywhere.

For more information head to: www.criticalstages.com.au

