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Jamil Khoury Interview

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Interviewer: Dasha Lubitov
Artist: Jamil Khoury
Telephone interview Chicago
February 2, 2016



Note: the following interview was conducted over the phone by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Art & Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2016 Winter Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, and Media & Design.

Bio: Jamil Khoury is the Founding Artistic Director of Silk Road Rising. Promoting playwrights of Silk Road backgrounds (Asian and Middle Eastern) is a passion that dovetails well with his experiences living in the Middle East and his eleven years as a cross-cultural trainer and international relocations consultant. A theatre producer, essayist, playwright, and film maker, Khoury's work focuses on Middle Eastern themes and questions of Diaspora. He is particularly interested in the intersections of culture, national identity, and citizenship, as well as ever-evolving notions of Americanness.

Bio and photo courtesy of: <http://www.silkroadrising.org/live-theater/re-spiced-a-silk-road-cabaret/about-creator-jamil-khoury>

Interview Transcript:

JK: Hello this is Jamil Khoury, is this a good time to get started?

DL: Yeah, it's great, thank you. Can you just tell me a little bit about yourself?

JK: I'm the founding artistic director of Silk Road Rising and we started the company (we being myself and my life partner Malik Gillani who is our executive director) in 2002 as response to the attacks of September 11, 2001, and also discourses about clash of civilizations, which we very strongly reject, and a climate of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment that gripped the country in the aftermath of the attacks, but continues to this day. When you ask to tell you a little about myself, what exactly are you asking for?

DL: Oh just about you, like where you grew up, your birthday, just things about yourself.

JK: I was born in the city of Chicago and I was raised in Mount Prospect, which is a suburb of Chicago, Northwest suburbs. I did my undergraduate at Georgetown in Washington, I graduated with a degree from the school of Foreign Service; it was a degree in international relations. Then I did my graduate work at the University of Chicago where I obtained a master's in religious studies. I've also gone through the Kellogg executive scholars program at the Kellogg School of Business at Northwestern in nonprofit management. I'm an artistic director, a producer, a playwright, an essayist, a filmmaker.

DL: I actually grew up not too far away in Buffalo Grove, also Northwest suburbs, so I know the area.

JK: Oh, great! My folks are still there.

DL: Could you tell me the meaning of your video, it's on your website, *Not Quite White: Arabs, Slavs, and the Contours of Contested Whiteness?*¹

JK: *Not Quite White* grew out of a short play that I had written. We did a collection of short plays; we commissioned under sort of the umbrella of the *DNA Trail*, and we actually produced the pieces as an evening of people that had a full run at Silk Road. And the *DNA Trail* was essentially seven playwrights, myself included. We each took a genealogical DNA test, which is a swab of saliva sent to a lab. We then received these results and we brought in experts, geneticists, a genetic ethicist, genealogists, and so forth to talk to us not just about the results, but

¹ Dir. Jamil Khoury and Stephen Combs. "Not Quite White: Arabs, Slavs and the Contours of Contested Whiteness," *Silk Road Rising*, 24:08, 2012, <http://www.silkroadrising.org/video-plays/not-quite-white-arabs-slavs-and-the-Contours-of-contested-whiteness>

a lot of the kind of surrounding meanings, and each of us wrote a short play. My short play was called *WASP: White Arab Slovak Pole*, which is really a reflection on my own ethnic heritage, my father being from Syria; my mother is American-born of Slovak and Polish heritage, and I wanted to look at sort of the relationship between Arab and Slovak identities, but more generally the relationship to American concepts of whiteness. And so out of *WASP* emerged the idea of a film that would look more deeply at questions of whiteness and using Arabs and Slavs as a prism from which to really explore contested categories of whiteness because Arabs and Slavs, like so many immigrant communities—Irish, Italian, Greek, Jews, Eastern European, and Southern European and Middle Eastern—kind of occupied this questionable space within the rubric of whiteness, which was always a very kind of elastic and expanding and inclusive term that relegated blackness to a very “otherized” and negative status. So, in my opinion, it became a way of entrenching a white supremacist system that one would essentially have to achieve entry into. And we see so many examples of that with any number of immigrant communities who did not have a consciousness necessarily around whiteness, or at least of how it’s constructed in the US, but assimilated themselves or were assimilated over time into that concept, often times, once again, to maintain these kind of racial hierarchies and binaries and so forth in the larger culture. So for me I was able to draw from my own heritage and my own, you know, family background, and working with the four academics—two Polish American, two Arab American academics—who appear in the film, to go a little deeper with those questions.

DL: Ok, why did you decide to make it in a video-play format? Was there any reason for getting the message out in that way?

JK: *Not Quite White* is a documentary that integrates some scenes and clips from a video play called *both/and*, so *both/and* is a short adaptation of my short play *WASP*. *Not Quite White* followed the making of this adaptation, and *both/and* was a somewhat revised version. For the documentary there are some clips, but *Not Quite White* isn’t a video play so much in and of itself, it’s a documentary that incorporates some theatrical roles, essentially. So why did I use clips in the documentary? We’re a theater, performance-based company, and I’m always looking for ways to bring theatricalized narrative or content into traditional documentary filmmaking. These are all in their own ways hybrid formulas that we are forever looking at, that we’re tweaking, evolving, developing the video play concept of itself; it’s a hybrid of the cinematic and the theatrical. It’s theatrical language through a cinematic lens. It’s that idea of blending that with more traditional documentary storytelling, and that becomes evident in a piece like *Not Quite White*.

DL: That makes sense. With my personal background, I’m a first generation Russian American Jewish woman, I found it really surprising to see your openness about your combination of Arab and Eastern European descent because I’ve seen through personal experience over the years that a lot of Eastern Europeans have prejudices against not only Jews, like myself, but also others; I’ve seen they hate a lot of different people. So my question is how has your public display of

these combination of cultures that are a huge part of who you are affected opinions in the eyes of people in this country or from anywhere around the world?

JK: I think it's had such a significant effect on countless levels, really. I am very cognizant of the fact that my father is an immigrant and I have an immigrant grandmother and, on the Slovak side, great grandparents, so immigrant experience and migration to Chicago and the process of becoming American, but preserving cultural identity and heritage, are themes that have been very strong in my life. I think that having the mixed heritage, I view it as very enriching and something that I continue to learn about and learn from. I don't think any community is immune from prejudices or racism; I've certainly been exposed to what you're referring to among Eastern European communities, but I'm inclined to think that these are universal problems that exist within any number of communities that encounter difference or otherness in our midst, so I don't have your experience, but I've certainly seen more than my share of racism coming from any number of quarters. It wasn't necessarily directed at me because I have the privilege of being white-appearing and of being a veil of privileges of whiteness and maleness in this culture, but I just don't think that anyone has the monopoly. No one owns prejudice, but it could also be in the Eastern European context that a lot of societies that we're referencing are fairly homogenous. Obviously there is a long-standing Jewish presence that has greatly been reduced since the Second World War: Roma or gypsy communities, ethno-religious minorities that have a long history in the region that have endured discrimination and persecution and so forth, and the flip side thriving and attaining some level of success in different points in history. But I guess with my film I was more interested in looking at how the communities assimilated themselves into whiteness, and part of that is being racist, quite frankly. Part of that is embracing these racist discourses, particularly against black people, and I think that is something any number of immigrant communities have adopted as a conscious, whether that be deliberately or not deliberately. I mean, there's going to be hundreds or thousands of different cases, and that we all have to examine our complicity in this system and the exchanges made, the losses that this has entailed, that is spoken of in the film. People changing their names, people losing their languages, and distancing themselves from their own ethnicities to fit in or to be accepted in a certain way. I'm going to guess that your experience in the Eastern European community may be somewhat different than my own and I'll take a shot at why. First of all, my father was the immigrant in my family and he came from Syria. I still have family in Syria and I have been traveling there since the age of five. Obviously I'm not going now because of this horrible situation. So I have this attachment to my Syrian heritage. I have an Arabic name, I grew up in an Arabic-speaking, Orthodox Christian community, and that's a very strong bond. Whereas my mom was American born and her mother was from Poland and her father was from Slovakia.

DL: Right, so that's where I guess it's different. My whole family is from what was the Soviet Union, now Ukraine.

JK: So I think that's probably the reason. And Jews within that context, and I think you'll probably know this much better than I do, were almost the quintessential *other* in the entrenched history of antisemitism, so I will say one thing; because I was raised in the Orthodox church, and this is the Syrian church, so my brother and my sister and I will sometimes kid about, because our Slovak heritage is on the Roman Catholic side we'll joke about being the "wrong Slavs" and I don't mean that in terms of Poles or Slavs at all, but the Orthodox Slavs are the Russians and the Ukrainians and the Bulgarians, Serbs and so forth. So we were kind of raised with this consciousness of the Orthodox world, or pan-Orthodoxy, and during the Ottoman Empire the Russian Tsar actually became the protector of the Orthodox Christians in the empire, so I'll often say to Jewish friends and acquaintances that the Tsar became the nightmare to the Jews and he became the protector of us, so it became this relationship that, ironically, Putin is now somehow evoking in this war in Syria that they're also protecting Christians and minorities. So I've always been very aware of Slovak Orthodox communities, and in particular the Russian community because it's so sizeable. But yeah, I think when communities and cultures and societies and nations are not challenged overtly on racism (and because this seems to be this tragic human tendency to need a villain or a bad guy or someone to direct suspicion and hostility towards), homogeneity doesn't help a whole lot. And I think that American society, we've been very forced, and rightfully so, to address and acknowledge our own history of racism and exclusion and how this plays out to this day. So there has probably been a lot more soul-searching and recognition and acknowledgement than in any number of other countries. I looked at Poland and I think it's 98% ethnic Polish, it's fairly mono-Polish. And I'm not saying that to criticize Poland in any way.

DL: I've looked at statistics like that too and a lot of different countries are like that in Eastern and Central Europe.

JK: Yeah, so if everyone is roughly the same culture and speaking the same language, it doesn't really prepare people for difference. Now of course in Poland's case you've had a Jewish presence for a thousand years. Poland was essentially the capital of the Jewish world for centuries, and while there are still some Jews living in Poland, that community was, as we know, destroyed.

DL: Last semester I was studying abroad in Budapest in Hungary when the Syrian refugee crisis was all anyone was talking about, especially in the beginning of my time there. And then the attack in Paris happened, so based on my previous question, have public opinions about your background in the last six months or so changed at all since these events have happened or been enlarged by the media?

JK: I mean, certainly I've been very troubled by the international response. You have people fleeing for their lives, people victimized over and over, and are literally—last resort—getting on rafts and boats, and risking their lives and often losing their lives, to get out of a very dire

situation that has produced a level of hopelessness for many Syrians. And for them to be perceived as an enemy or as a threat, that's a pretty painful blow. And then what we saw coming out from Republican presidential candidates, and from 31 U.S. governors saying that they didn't want to accept Syrian refugees, and certainly what was coming out of Hungary and statements that were coming out, primarily, from Eastern and Central Europe that were very xenophobic, islamophobic, very racist. That's heartbreaking. So in terms of perception, I follow events in Syria very closely and I follow the refugee crisis very closely and this weekend I'm doing staged readings about this issue and cause that I feel very passionately about. A number of people have reached out to me and expressed concern and asked me about how my family is, and so forth. So at least in the bubble that I live in I feel that I've been moved by people's responses and reactions.

DL: Well that's great! How can you compare the recent changes in public opinion to that after 9/11? Or is it even comparable, do you think?

JK: The post-9/11 era was immediately one of, you know, we saw the emergence of a type of American nativism and tribalism that was really premised on the idea of us-vs-them and anyone who was brown essentially became a suspect or outsider or a potential threat. My husband was born in Pakistan and came here at the age of seven, and he's Muslim. I have to say that I was much more aware of this hostility and suspicion and distress through him and just existing in the world with him, and once again that's about being "white-appearing," that's quite white. So I identify very strongly with brown people and Arabs and the Muslim world and Eastern Christians, Mizrahi Jews, so I was and remain very conscientious about the need to be vigilant and proactive in combating this kind of hostility and profiling, and so much of the work we do at Silk Road is just that. The play that I'm currently working on that we're going to be producing in the spring, *Mosque Alert*, it's fictional but it's based on several of these cases with the opposition to the building of mosques, and these communities all felt threatened that a mosque would inflict harm on themselves or their community. So we have been looking at the aftermath and the after attacks of 9/11, and this gets repeated when we see other terrorist attacks, like what occurred in Paris a few months ago. This kind of anger and rage and suspicion gets resuscitated in all kinds of harmful and bizarre ways. Take movements like ISIS which are genocidal and murderous movements that need to be stopped. I mean, they certainly threaten all of us in the region who are minorities, but most of their victims are in fact Muslims overwhelmingly, so I think this tendency to conflate Muslims with crazy and dangerous people is grotesquely unfair and just patently wrong.

DL: You're right. And it's always easier for people to blame someone with a difference, like in their skin, that people can see. What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

JK: We're a theater company, so we create both live theater and what we call online theater through Asian American and Middle Eastern American lenses, or primarily we've worked with non-American playwrights with what we call Silk Road background, which is basically East Asian, South Asian, or Middle Eastern. And we are committed to putting forth perspectives and experiences and voices that traditionally have not been displayed on Chicago's stages. The protagonist in our plays are always of the same background as the playwright. That kind of alignment of playwright and protagonist gives you, as the audience, a journey with a Chinese person, a Pakistani person, whatever the case. I also think it's important for me to state that we don't do celebratory work, like, "oh, isn't it great to be Japanese? Isn't it great to be Iranian?" These are plays that are complicated and complex and three dimensional and certainly something that was very important to us that remains important to us to this day. And we Silk Road people are not angels nor demons, but human beings. So I'm not interested in angels and demons, I'm interested in people and our complexities and whatnot, so we have made an important contribution to Chicago theater and beyond because we have been very consistent about the need to reclaim authorial voice and telling stories that emanate within communities and challenge mainstream audiences. So it's not about "come and feel good and have a great time"; it really is about "let theater be a mirror to pose important questions," sometimes uncomfortable questions, "let theater help us grow." Let theater help us evolve and reflect and be introspective and connect. I'm particularly interested in stories that link Silk Road people with non-Silk Road people because we don't live in silos, we are interfacing and interacting with people of very different backgrounds from us and we are affected by that and our own cultures change as a result of it. There's this constant culture interchange and that is something that I as an artist and as a producer am very interested in exploring. Nothing is static, nothing remains the same, and we are always changing in the process of interacting with our own communities and outside of our communities.

DL: Lastly, you briefly mentioned it earlier, but what are you currently working on?

JK: I am working on a play called *Mosque Alert* that is going to begin previews at Silk Road on March 24th through May 1st [2016], hopefully beyond that, and it is a play that we actually started in a non-traditional way as part of a project where the early stages involved posting things online, like videos of characters, soliciting input from a virtual audience. So it really began as an online project and we developed any number of videos and would have these robust conversations, frankly, and then started doing live presentations that involved screening this material. Then I was reminded that my initial intent was to turn it into a full-length play. I say reminded jokingly because we became so consumed with the video content that I was sort of delaying writing the piece, then a professor of Knox College in Illinois approached me and said, well if we give you a residency at Knox to write the play and produce it will you do it? And I said absolutely! So *Mosque Alert* has undergone a really interesting several-stage development as a play, and most recently as a production at Knox College in February of 2015, followed by a

second college production in November of 2015 at Valparaiso University in Indiana, and both times I revised the script, and am now revising it again, each time having learned from the previous iteration what was working and what wasn't. So it's been a very involved process and one that has been enormously rewarding for me as an artist. So many people have worked on this project in one way or another and its many iterations and so many people have shared insights and experiences and opinions that have really helped me frame this piece. And we're looking forward to this upcoming world premiere production because it's the official production that we're doing in the spring, which I'm hoping that you will come see!²

DL: Yeah I'm definitely going to look into it.

JK: And I think you'll see a through-line with some of the themes that we were discussing earlier.

DL: Well I am going to keep myself posted on your website. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me I really appreciate it!

JK: Listen, I wish you the best of luck, and small world that we're from the same area.

END.

² Written by Jamil Khoury and Directed by Edward Torres, "Mosque Alert," March 24 - May 01, 2016, Pierce Hall at the Historic Chicago Temple Building, 77 W. Washington St., Chicago. "Inspired by the 'Ground Zero Mosque' controversy in New York City, *Mosque Alert* tells the story of three fictional families living in Naperville, Illinois, whose lives are interrupted by a proposed Islamic Center on the site of a beloved local landmark. *Mosque Alert* explores the intersections of zoning and Islamophobia with humor, family drama, and refreshingly blunt honesty." <http://www.silkroadrising.org/live-theater/mosque-alert>