

Critics' Forum
Theater
The Times of Their Lives
By Aram Kouyoumdjian



The title of Stephen Adly Guirgis' gritty drama "In Arabia, We'd All Be Kings" doubles as a line spoken by one of its characters, Sammy, the resident drunk of a dive bar. In some ways, Sammy, old and nostalgic with alcohol, can trace his roots back to a barfly in a play from an earlier era. The barfly is a philosophizing immigrant (coincidentally enough, an Arab) given to such pithy utterances as "No foundation. All the way down the line." The earlier play is William Saroyan's "The Time of Your Life."

Written 60 years apart – Saroyan penned his sprawling drama in 1939, Guirgis in 1999 – both plays are loosely plotted works set in bars, where all sorts of humanity stream in and out. Last year, the Open Fist Theatre Company staged a fine revival of "The Time of Your Life" in Hollywood. Now, the Elephant Theatre Company is presenting a first-rate production of "In Arabia, We'd All Be Kings" along the same Theatre Row.

"Time" takes place at Nick's Saloon, a spot along the San Francisco waterfront. The innocence of a jukebox and a pinball machine notwithstanding, the joint is frequented by sailors, longshoremen, and prostitutes. "Important people never come here," Nick himself says. Caught at the tail end of the 1930s, Saroyan's characters, mostly poor and unemployed, have only the Depression years to look back upon and a second world war to look forward to.

“In Arabia” unfolds in the Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood of New York City and follows similarly marginalized members of society struggling to eke out an existence, even as some of them spiral into the vortex of an ever-pervasive drug culture.

Guirgis’ play opens at the bar with the story of Lenny, an ex-felon seeking to resume his life and his relationship with his girlfriend, Daisy. The bar, however, is really a haven for downtrodden denizens, including the druggie Skank. In fact, it only holds promise for Greer, a wealthy developer who wishes to acquire the space. Having no money himself, Lenny faces demeaning job prospects – and Daisy’s rejection.

The action soon turns to Skank and his own girlfriend, Chickie, herself a crank addict. To feed their habit, Chickie resorts to prostituting herself on the streets along with a young girl named Demaris, while Skank submits to the predatory advances of Greer in return for money. In the play’s most taut and chilling bit, Greer negotiates down Skank’s asking price to a paltry \$20, which Skank, in his desperation, accepts.

As Greer eventually acquires the bar and the neighborhood faces gentrification, some of the characters meet with tragedy; the rest try to outrun the ominous fates that await them. “In Arabia” offers an unflinching look at lives devastated by addiction, and this topic lends the play the gritty feel that “Time” – despite its own depictions of hardship – lacks. Though it pulsates with an undercurrent of social protest, Saroyan’s play exudes earnestness and hope. Even its ending, while far from simplistic, metes out swift justice to the play’s villainous cop, Blick, while saving its suffering prostitute, Kitty, from the streets.

Saroyan’s seemingly bottomless optimism certainly riled many critics in his day, who deemed it excessive and even irritating. Phillip Rahv, an influential leftist writer and editor, dismissed Saroyan’s “formula of innocence” as “the formula of ‘Ah, the wonder, the beauty of it all.’” Of course, a deeper reading of Saroyan’s work reveals his optimism to be “wistful, almost desperate” – as Gerald Rabkin has put it – “accurately reflect[ing] the mood of the late thirties.”

Like Saroyan, Guirgis accurately reflects the mood of his own era, as he dwells on the ever-widening gap between rich and poor. Unlike Saroyan, however, his optimism is measured. Guirgis locates hope in the redemptive power of personal relationships – a power that allows solitary souls to trust, to give of themselves, to connect, and as a result of those bonds, to achieve a sense of belonging and security.

“In Arabia” boasts a gifted cast, flawless direction by David Fofi, and strong technical elements – an authentic set, effective lighting, and well-suited costumes. Fofi maximizes the tension in the script, even as he ably draws out its dark humor. The coiled construct of “In Arabia” certainly differs from the vaudevillian aspect of Saroyan’s play. Still, both works weave complex, intersecting plotlines that tell more than stories; they capture the unique times of their authors’ lives.

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Aram Kouyoumdjian is the winner of Elly Awards for both playwriting (“The Farewells”) and directing (“Three Hotels”). His latest work is “Velvet Revolution.”

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