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YOU BURY ME

by Ahlam

SAMUEL FRENCH

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YOU BURY ME was co-produced by Paines Plough, The Women's Prize for Playwriting, 45North, The Royal Lyceum Theatre Edinburgh and the Orange Tree Theatre, in association with Bristol Old Vic. It was first performed on 24th February 2023. The cast was as follows:

RAFIK. . . . . Nezar Alderazi
TAMER. . . . . Moe Bar-El
OSMAN. . . . . Tarrick Benham
ALIA. . . . . Hanna Khogali
LINA. . . . . Eleanor Nawal
MAYA. . . . . Yasemin Özdemir

Writer – Ahlam
Director – Katie Posner
Designer – Sara Perks
Lighting Designer – Aideen Malone
Composer – Kareem Samara
Sound Designer – Adam P McCready
Movement Director – Annie-Lunnette Deakin-Foster
Casting Director – Jacob Sparrow
Assistant Director – Riwa Saab
Intimacy Director – Robbie Taylor Hunt
Production Manager – Ryan Funnell
Company Stage Manager – Lois Sime
Assistant Stage Manager – Charlotte Smith-Barker
Technical Stage Manager – Simon Perkins
Lighting Programmer (Bristol Old Vic)/Relighter (Edinburgh Lyceum) – Matthew Carnazza
Costume Supervisor – Manuela Fleming

With thanks to:
Indhu Rubasingham, Nina Steiger, Sarah Dickenson, Dennis Kelly, Tanya Agarwal, Katie Austin, Phillippe Cato, Ellie Claughton, Holly Gladwell, Lauren Hamilton, Christabel Holmes, Jesse Jones and Ellen Larson.

This play has had various pockets of support through its writing and development. Thank you to the various organisations that offered space and time over the years. Thanks to the festivals and theatres that platformed the play through various readings. Thank you to all the actors that have brought these characters

to life in these developments and readings. Thank you to Sophie Moniram who championed the script from draft one and never ceased to believe in it. Thank you to the playwrights that took time to read, feedback and mentor me through the process of writing draft after draft. And finally thank you to my friends and family who supported me through meltdowns when I thought the script was utter shit. Unfortunately I cannot name most of the people or organisations in order to maintain my anonymity but I would like to say a big thank you to all anyway, without your support this script would not exist.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

I can't talk about this play without talking about its beating heart. It is the cradle that holds the character, the story, 'The City'.

From the first conversations with Ahlam, I could feel this deep, painful, conflicted love pour out of her when she spoke of Cairo. She shared stories about the world she grew up in, the laughter, the pain, the politics, and that feeling of loss and searing grief over what it means to love her city. Over these endless chats and coffees, I understood how deeply she felt for all of the characters in her play. It drew me in, made me want to explore more, and attempt to understand the many layers to Egypt.

This play was made with love by so many wonderful people who have spoken with truth, joy and wisdom, and we see the story through their eyes. It has been joyful, inspiring and beautiful. It belongs to the memories of the people, the land and the soil that holds them. I feel forever changed by them.

This city, this play, has lived with me, and lingers forever inside of me. Forever moved, enlivened, angry, galvanised and ready, ready never ever to forget.

I hope the play will do the same to you.

Katie

WRITER'S NOTE

This play is about many things, it's about youth, it's about revolution, it's about violence, it's about love. Beyond that, this play is a love letter to Cairo, a love letter to the people of Cairo. Particularly to the people of Cairo who stood in Tahrir Square in 2011, demanding a better world for themselves and for others. This play can only capture a fragment of that world that I grew up in, and a sliver of the city that raised me. But what I hope that this play does is honour my peers, many of whom are present in these characters I've written. These are people I grew up with, people I went to school with, people I cried to in the middle of the night and laughed with till the early morning, people who would drive an extra hour out of their way just to make sure I'd get home safe, these are people I joyfully debated and argued with over beer and termes, people I danced and flirted with, people I've built dreams with, people I've heard about through gossip, people who have inspired me, people I've shared rides with, people I've been stuck in traffic with for hours with, people I've watched overthrow a government, people I've watched organise campaign after campaign for human rights and personal safety, people I've supported through loss and heartbreak (both personal and political), people who supported me through the alienation that is specific to migration while still clashing with riot police regularly, people who helped me fall in love with a city I grew up resenting, these are people I fell in love with, people I fell out with and made up with, people I admired from afar, people who are still processing the trauma of what happened in 2011, and the trauma of what has happened since, people who are not allowed to mourn their dead, people who are not allowed to celebrate their memories. This play is dedicated most of all to those who have lost their lives to the Mubarak regime and every government that followed. To those who lost their lives to incarceration and exile, to those who have had their lives taken from them and to those who made the excruciating decision to take their own. This play was written as an act of mourning, as an act of honouring, and most of all, as an act of love. I hope this play offers that space to all: to those of us who were in Tahrir Square, and those of us who were not.

CHARACTERS

ALIA – An Egyptian. 22 years old. She has just graduated with an Engineering degree from Cairo University. She comes from a conservative Muslim family. Her paternal lineage have all served or are serving in the police. She's in love with Tamer.

TAMER – An Egyptian. 22 years old. He has also graduated with an Engineering degree from Cairo University. He comes from a traditional Christian family. Christians in Egypt are primarily Copts (Egyptian Orthodox Christians). He's in love with Alia.

LINA – An Egyptian. 17 years old. She's in high school. She comes from a traditional Christian family. She's still in the process of discovering her sexuality and gender.

MAYA – An Egyptian. 18 years old. She's in the same high school as Lina. She comes from a left-leaning family, so her family aren't religious. They might be more agnostic or atheist but they don't label themselves as such, you could say they're culturally Muslim. Her parents are divorced and Osman is her half brother (same father).

OSMAN – An Egyptian. 25 years old. He's a journalist and blogger. He was very active during the Egyptian uprising and wrote extensively about it. He's in love with Zeina, a staunch political activist.

RAFIK – An Egyptian. 25 years old. He graduated with a degree in English literature from Cairo University. After graduating, he didn't know what he wanted to do and decided to just smoke his problems away.

THE CITY – The city narrates, explains, confuses, comforts, challenges, shares its stories. The city should be played by all of the actors in the play.

SETTING

Cairo

TIME

This play starts in 2015.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

تقبرني (to'-bor-ni): Lit. 'You bury me'. A saying in Levantine Arabic used to express affection and love. 'May you bury me' is a declaration that one does not want to live without a loved one (or loved thing).

This play is dedicated to Cairo, and to all those who (are cursed enough to) love her.

PROLOGUE: WELCOME TO CAIRO

*(***THE CITY** *enters.)*

THE CITY. In 2011, Egypt had a revolution.

We have to mention this because it's been a long time.

And you might not know.

Or maybe you forgot.

That's what's scary.

That we will all forget.

We had demonstrations all across Egypt.

But all eyes were on Cairo.

The beating heart of the country.

Cairo isn't the beating heart.

More like the liver.

The swollen, sick, failing liver.

It can be both.

It's the beating heart and the failing liver.

A government

No.

A Dictator.

No.

A Tyrant

Good one.

A tyrant dictator and his government… was overthrown.

A regime collapsed and –

A new era began.

What we want you to understand is the revolution politicised a generation.

My generation.

Our generation.

Our degenerate, whiny, good-for-nothing, spoilt, shitty, millennial generation.

What we want you to understand is that in 2011 we were on the brink of creating a different world for ourselves.

One in which we weren't helpless, useless, powerless in the gnarled claws of decaying regimes.

One in which we weren't running to the West only to be called terrorists, barbarians, and thrown back into the sea.

We were pushing back. We pushed and pushed, and for just a moment, we tasted freedom.

Not quite.

We tasted freedom.

We were able to imagine the *possibility* of tasting freedom.

I actually *tasted* freedom.

Would you both just shut up?

This story isn't even about 2011.

This story isn't about that… dream.

This is a story about death.

The death of that dream.

This is about 2015.

About that feeling.

That feeling of the beginning of the end.

You know that feeling?

I mean, we all know that feeling these days.

As we plummet to our doom.

You know that existential horror?

Of just watching it all go completely to fuck?

In Egypt we know that feeling well.

For our generation, 2015 is when we experienced the dying embers of hope.

This is when our story set.

As for the where…

Cairo.

The thing about Cairo is…

The thing that sets Cairo apart is that…

It's that –

Apart from what?

What's it apart from?

Yeah, why are we being vague?

Why does Cairo always have to be special?

It always thinks it's so fucking special

Full of attention-seeking little –

This could be anywhere

But it's not

It's this city

Our city.

The city is us!

We are the city!

Stop fucking around.

We're talking about –

Cairo. We're talking about Cairo.

We are –

THE THING ABOUT CAIRO IS

OSMAN. She's all layers.

*(***THE CITY** *explodes to life. It's Mercedes Benz and donkey carts. It's exhaust fumes, shisha smoke, grit, and grime. It's pedestrians snaking through rows of cars. It's hustlers and beggars and people trying to get by. It's veg and fruit vendors, 'roba bikya' carts and kids selling lemons. It's men selling grilled corn and roasted sweet potatoes. It's football games through small radios and old televisions. It's policemen discreetly snoring at embassy doors. It's celebrations on colourful boats on the Nile. It's the echoes of calls to prayer from higher ground. It's lively conversations over iced frappes. It's lively conversations over liver sandwiches. It's a family of six riding a motorbike at high speed on the bridge. It's the slow traffic beeping its way through the sunset, towards The City of the Dead.)*

Scene One

THE CITY. In this city…

We stay up late.

We also wake up late.

We're also late to everything all the time.

It's not personal.

It's cultural!

We are the city that never sleeps.

And here we have Osman.

Osman wants to sleep.

He wants to sleep so badly.

*(**OSMAN** is pacing at his desk. His laptop is open. He is trying to find the right words.)*

OSMAN. The thing about Cairo is… it's all layers.

It's all Mercedes and donkey carts. It's exhaust fumes and smoke and grit… No.

This city…

(He sits down at his laptop. He writes.)

This city cannot be defined. Not in the traditional sense. It is not a homogenous space. It is not a coherent space. To be Cairo one must accept the contradictions, the paradox of life, making existence an oxymoron. We are not a singular way of life, not a singular way of thinking, we are not a singular culture, as aggressive as the national project tries to be. We need to think of a different way of being and thus of governing. The revolution and its failure made this clear. We need to organise with those we disagree with, the moment we

compete for power it all falls apart. Power is in the collective, the revolution proved this as well.

My question is how can we learn from this city? How can we learn to hold multitudes within ourselves? How do we find harmony in opposition? How can we hold on to love when we are surrounded by death?

We may not be able to resist in our streets, but let's keep asking questions, let's keep learning from this ancient city because I'm not ready to give into despair.

We can do better than another military regime. We deserve better.

The revolution lives on comrades. In our hearts and in our minds.

(He uploads the blog post.)

Scene Two

THE CITY. Meet Tamer.

Tamer's idea of love came from films.

American rom coms.

Egyptian black and white films.

And the occasional fluffy French film.

Stories full of boy meets girl.

Boy falls for girl.

Girl either immediately or eventually falls for boy.

He always wondered if he was leading man material.

Was he more Omar Sharif or Keanu Reeves?

Was he more George Clooney or Rushdy Abaza?

He always believed that there would only be One. One who will capture his imagination and grip his…

Heart?

Thoughts?

Soul?

SOUL!

Tamer believed in soulmates.

Every girl that crossed his path was potentially The One.

He didn't fall in love with every girl he met.

But well…

He considered it.

Because he's a sap.

No, don't say that. He's romantic.

He's cringe.

He's not.

Enough!

Tamer believed in soulmates.

Because maybe just maybe…

That look…

That closeness…

That accidental hand brush…

*(**TAMER** and **ALIA** are sitting on the corniche, looking at all the lights dancing, reflecting in the Nile, music plays in the distance. They are both in their early twenties.)*

TAMER. So…?

ALIA. So?

TAMER. What am I doing here?

ALIA. I … I don't know.

TAMER. Right.

ALIA. I miss you.

TAMER. …

I'm sorry but… I can't.

ALIA. No wait.

You don't want me anymore?

TAMER. Alia… No. That's not fair. You know how I feel! I think I've made it absolutely clear what I want. You're the one that ended it, you're the one that said –

ALIA. I want you.

TAMER. …

ALIA. I can't help it.

TAMER. No… I … Not again – You, you, you said that –

ALIA. I love you.

TAMER. …

ALIA. There. I said it.

TAMER. …

ALIA. …please say something.

TAMER. We can't keep doing this. I don't know how to… deal with this.

ALIA. Do you want to stop speaking to me?

TAMER. No. No, of course not.

ALIA. …

TAMER. What is wrong with us?

ALIA. I don't know.

*(***TAMER** *holds her hand.* **ALIA** *is trying not to show how ecstatic she is.)*

I … Tamer, I want to kiss you.

TAMER. Really?

ALIA. Yes. I really want to.

*(***TAMER** *looks around to make sure no one is looking.)*

(He looks at **ALIA**, *takes a deep breath and… finally they kiss and its joyous.)*

*(***ALIA** *and* **TAMER** *break away. They make sure no one is watching. They steal another quick, blissful kiss.)*

Scene Three

THE CITY. You see, Osman is what some people call…a writer?

A revolutionary!

A woke flake socialist bro man.

No.

Too much?

Just no.

Osman started out as a blogger.

Yes!

The golden age of blogging.

When blogs were deep.

And personal.

Insightful.

Thoughtful.

Witty.

Fun.

He blogged and posted.

He organised and strategized.

He debated and learned.

And he met Zeina.

Zeina.

Now Zeina really is revolutionary.

Some people say she's too much.

Some people say she's too provocative.

Some people say she's too angry.

And why shouldn't she be?

There's lots to be angry about.

Zeina does not take shit from anyone.

Including Osman.

And he loves that about her.

And these days he has trouble sleeping.

When he's not with her.

(Suddenly there's knocking on a door. It's a Dokki flat, a phone is ringing. **OSMAN** *appears. His phone has woken him up. The knocking has disoriented him.)*

OSMAN. Shit.

Hello?

RAFIK. Osman!

OSMAN. Rafik? Are you there?

RAFIK. Yes! I'm outside –

OSMAN. Call the police. I mean, I think the police is at my door. Call Zeina!

RAFIK. It's not the police, it's –

OSMAN. What? Who else would it be? Who would knock at this hour?

RAFIK. Do you really think the police fucking knock?

OSMAN. Of course the police knock first… they're thugs but they don't just smash people's doors in.

RAFIK. Osman listen to me –

OSMAN. I don't know what you're saying.

RAFIK. I'm outside!

OSMAN. Outside of what?

RAFIK. The door. I'm standing in front of the door.

OSMAN. What door?

RAFIK. YOUR door. The knocking is me you idiot!

OSMAN. You're knocking?

RAFIK. Fuck's sake. OPEN THE FUCKING DOOR.

*(***OSMAN** *opens the door,* **RAFIK** *is standing there with a big bag.)*

OSMAN. What are you doing here? What time is it?

(Call to prayer starts.)

RAFIK. It's four!

OSMAN. What is going on?

RAFIK. I need a place to crash. Can I stay here for a bit?

OSMAN. Yeah sure, of course.

RAFIK. My dad kicked me out.

OSMAN. Again?

RAFIK. Yes.

OSMAN. Hash?

RAFIK. No.

OSMAN. Sex?

RAFIK. He finally told me that I was adopted and wouldn't be able to inherit his fortune anyway, so I was like 'I'm done with this, I'm out' –

OSMAN. Porn?

RAFIK. Who gets kicked out because of porn?

OSMAN. So what is it?

RAFIK. Told him I'm an atheist.

OSMAN. But you're not.

RAFIK. We had a fight, he threatened me with a knife, my mother cried, my sister had to step in to protect me. You know, the usual.

OSMAN. Right, I don't need to know.

RAFIK. He caught me with a boy.

OSMAN. Caught you? You brought a boy to the house?

RAFIK. Where else were we going to go?

OSMAN. You're awful at this.

RAFIK. At what?

OSMAN. Dating men obviously.

RAFIK. First of all, you don't get to say that because you know nothing about it. And second, you are a shit friend.

OSMAN. You're banging on my door at four a.m.

RAFIK. You know that dating men is uncharted territory for me, and you shouldn't –

OSMAN. Alright. I'm sorry.

Are you okay?

RAFIK. I'm homeless, but otherwise all good.

OSMAN. Obviously make yourself at home. Stay as long as you need.

Spliff?

RAFIK. No, I'm good.

OSMAN. ...?

RAFIK. When would I ever say no?

(The call to prayer continues. **OSMAN** *and* **RAFIK** *listen. They smoke.)*

Would you rather be attractive and boring or unattractive and interesting?

OSMAN. Unattractive and interesting.

RAFIK. Really?

OSMAN. No one wants to be around boring people.

RAFIK. Everyone wants to be around attractive people. That's what attractive means.

OSMAN. Boring people though…

(They smoke.)

I'm going back to sleep. You know where the sheets are?

RAFIK. Yeah don't worry about me man.

OSMAN. Great. You know the rules, no blasting Mounir at seven in the morning. No singing Adele at the top of your lungs. And absolutely no MTM played in this house. Ever.

RAFIK. You are so… boring.

OSMAN. I'm serious.

RAFIK. OK… what about Shakira?

OSMAN. Rafik.

RAFIK. I'll be on best behaviour. Promise.

OMAR. Goodnight.

RAFIK. May you wake up to a better world.

OSMAN. Don't make me regret letting you stay.

*(***RAFIK** *continues to smoke.)*

Scene Four

(Detention at a high school. **LINA** *is writing her one hundred lines,* **MAYA** *is bored and not writing. They are both in their last year of high school.)*

THE CITY. The first time a boy tried to kiss Maya was in the fourth grade.

He went up to her.

Puckered his lips.

And she wacked him right in the eye.

He called her a

'Dumb bitch!'

And ran off.

That was the first time anyone had ever called her a

'Dumb bitch!'

But it wouldn't be the last.

Within minutes Maya is being sent to the principal's office.

They tell her off.

They say respectable girls don't behave this way.

They say it's her fault because she spends too much time playing with boys.

They call her mother.

Her mother is furious.

Livid.

Completely and utterly enraged.

Not with Maya.

With the school.

She demands the boy is punished.

The entire ride home, she swears and calls her teachers idiots.

At home, her mother sits her down and tells her she did the right thing.

And then she says

"If that little shit tries it again, kick him in the balls."

MAYA. Did you ever think about having a makeover?

LINA. Sorry?

MAYA. A makeover. You know, like in *She's All That*.

LINA. She's All That?

MAYA. Yeah, that old movie. Have you seen it?

LINA. I think so. Doesn't she just get a haircut? Not exactly a makeover.

MAYA. Haircut can make all the difference, have you seen Ms. Shereen?

LINA. Yeah but –

MAYA. A new haircut and a new outfit, and you'll be smoking hot.

LINA. I don't really care about all that.

MAYA. Well, that's a shame. Have you seen your eyes?

LINA. Thanks?

MAYA. I can make you look incredible. Let's do it. It'll be fun.

LINA. Why are you talking to me?

MAYA. I've always wanted to do the makeover thing, but I've never met someone who needed it.

We can have drinks at mine afterwards, do you drink?

LINA. A little…

MAYA. I knew there was something about you. The quiet ones are always a little wild.

LINA. I don't know if I would call myself wild…

MAYA. It's a compliment, wild is fun.

Thursday good for you? Makeover and drinks?

LINA. I don't… I –

MAYA. Come on!

LINA. Okay, yes.

Thursday's fine.

Scene Five

THE CITY. This city has a way of…

Shoving God down your throat.

I wasn't going to say that but…

It's accurate.

Come on, that's a bit over the top.

It's exactly like that.

And God stays stuck there.

It's not like that.

It is a bit.

God stays stuck there, nowhere to go, nowhere to grow.

We're a spiritual people!

No, we're not.

Not all spiritual.

We're so fucking spiritual.

It's just that sometimes… we forget.

The God in our throats isn't ours.

That's the problem.

Like when Rafik first started doubting his belief in God.

He was twelve.

He felt he couldn't tell a soul.

And then in high school he was told to keep his doubts to himself.

He started to interpret God as love.

God is love and God loves you no matter what.

For him that made love divine and for a while, that was enough.

He felt he could breathe a bit.

Then in university.

He met a woman.

A woman that would change everything.

She believed nothing.

She said things he didn't allow himself to think.

She terrified him.

And he could not stop thinking about her.

He lost God.

And fell into her.

He lost himself.

The ground he walked on fell away and then –

She left him.

No, he left her.

I'm pretty sure she left him.

It doesn't matter!

The point is he was in free fall.

Then the revolution happened.

And he felt the God in his throat dislodge and spread.

Spread all over.

Spread through him.

He finally understood what it meant for a body to be sacred.

For *his* body to be sacred.

See? That's what I meant.

We're a spiritual people.

*(**RAFIK** is sitting on the couch, spaced out, he grabs a book and begins to read.)*

(He struggles to focus. He throws the book back on the table.)

RAFIK. Fuck it.

*(**OSMAN** bursts in. He quickly strips as much off his clothes as is appropriately possible. He stands in front of the fan or air conditioning.)*

The electricity's cut.

OSMAN. Fuck this dicksucking, cuntfingering, motherfucking piece of shit cock of a day!

RAFIK. Rough day?

OSMAN. Cairo I fucking hate you, you soul-sucking, spirit-crushing bitch of a city!

RAFIK. You done?

OSMAN. SHIT. FUCK. BALLS.

RAFIK. …

OSMAN. OK I'm done.

*(**OSMAN** sits on the couch. On cue, **RAFIK** begins to roll a joint.)*

Thank fuck you didn't finish it all today. I seriously would have thrown you out the window.

RAFIK. Which window would you choose? Your bedroom window into the back alley? Or the living room window into the main street?

OSMAN. What difference does it make?