

REVIEW

# Earworm at Crow's Theatre is a must-see amid foreign interference inquiry

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Aida Keykhai in Earworm.

DAHLIA KATZ/HANDOUT

- **Title:** Earworm
- **Written and directed by:** Mohammad Yaghoubi
- **Actors:** Aida Keykhai, Amir Maghami, Parya Heravi, Amir Zavosh
- **Company:** Nowadays Theatre
- **Venue:** Crow's Theatre Studio Theatre

- **City:** Toronto, Ont.
- **Year:** Runs to Feb. 25, 2024

## Critic's Pick

While the federal inquiry into foreign interference is on a break, Commissioner Justice Marie-Josée Hogue and Canadian MPs of all stripes should take the opportunity to travel to Toronto to see Nowadays Theatre's *Earworm*, a play that skilfully dramatizes the issues at stake regarding our democratic freedoms.

This hair-raising piece of political theatre, written and directed by Mohammad Yaghoubi and presented in association with Crow's Theatre, illuminates that Canada isn't much of a refuge any more for many who have come here to escape persecution and repression.

That this message sneaks up on you in what initially seems like a comedy about an intergenerational immigrant family makes it all the more effective.

Homa (Aida Keykhai), *Earworm*'s extraordinary protagonist, is an Iranian-Canadian with a feminist podcast where, largely, she speaks out against the regime in Iran and its human rights abuses.

Pendar (Amir Maghami), Homa's university-age son who lives with her, is respectful and loving toward his mother, knowing the sacrifices she's made for him, but still seems slightly embarrassed by her outspokenness.



Select performances are done in Farsi, with English surtitles on a screen above the stage.

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In their relationship, theatregoers will recognize a dynamic familiar from Canadian dramas about immigrants and their children ranging from David French's *Leaving Home* to Ins Choi's *Kim's Convenience* – but with a larger-than-life matriarch ruling the roost in this case, and it's left up to you to decide which generation holds the more progressive opinions.

While Homa worries her son, who she brought to Canada when he was just a child, has grown complacent about the freedoms they enjoy here, Pendar feels his mother ignores issues such as Islamophobia in her new country amid her narrow focus on the outrages of the Islamic Republic.

A divide emerges when Fatemeh (Parya Heravi), Pendar's girlfriend, invites Homa over for dinner to meet her religious father who is visiting from Iran – and has one request: would she mind wearing the hijab?

Homa has very strong political feelings about anything that strikes of “mandatory hijab” – and deeply personal reasons for refusing such a request. But Pendar doesn't understand why she can't just pretend she is having a bad hair day and politely put on a head scarf for a night for the sake of harmony with a family he intends to marry into.

When intermission comes, *Earworm* seems like it might be heading toward a hackneyed form of North American theatre – the dinner-party comedy. You know, where a group of characters with different politics or beliefs end up sitting next to each other and cordiality gradually gives way to chucked chelo kebabs.

My assumption was that the second act would see the brash and not always likeable (though very funny) Homa having her perceptions of ultrareligious Muslims like Fatemeh's dad, Mohammad (a superbly simmering Amir Zavosh), tempered.

All I will say further about the plot, however, is that Yaghoubi's play goes off in its own surprising direction.



The show is a hair-raising piece of political theatre, written and directed by Mohammad Yaghoubi.

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Or perhaps I should say directions. When Homa has the audience decide which topic she will next podcast about early on (you get to choose by a show of hands), *Earworm* sets up the idea that there are different ways that this story might play out, just as there are different futures possible in Iran after the protests of 2022 sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini following her arrest by the morality police (and indeed different possible futures in Canada). Yaghoubi aims to be honest but not hopeless in his art.

While his staging as a director can be a little pro forma, Yaghoubi's writing is wonderful – full of pleasing metatheatricality but anchored by truthful characters, and finding a brilliant sonic metaphor for how the past hounds Homa. (Sina Shoaie is the sound designer.)

Meanwhile, playing Homa, Keykhai – who co-founded Nowadays Theatre with Yaghoubi in 2016 – is simply electric, especially in delivering her artfully constructed podcast polemics; these are lengthy but nevertheless keep you on the edge of your seat with a sense of the danger of the opinions being expressed.

The questions asked in *Earworm* have resonance well beyond the specifics of the Iranian diaspora – the harassment of which by foreign agents the Conservative Party has requested the inquiry on interference expand to examine – to similar alleged on-the-ground and online influence activities in Canada emanating from other authoritarian countries, and countries drifting toward authoritarianism.

But centring as it does around a Toronto-based podcast that takes aim at the Iranian regime, *Earworm* also faces up to the reality that the internet has erased many of the differences between here and there. We are all connected and borders are, in even more ways than before, a fiction and the sooner Canada catches up to that fact the better.

I saw *Earworm* on a night where its four performers all acted their parts in Farsi, with English surtitles on a screen above the stage. At most of the performances, however, they perform in English. So check before you book based on your preference.

For me, seeing the show in Farsi was a great opportunity to watch local actors perform in a non-official language, and be immersed in an audience clearly deeply affected by the subject matter and debates of the play. It was an illuminating experience that continued in the lobby in postshow conversations – as I'm sure it would be, too, for any commissioners and politicians who buy a ticket.

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