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## REVIEW: *Earworm* is as gorgeous as it is thought-provoking

By Aisling Murphy



**T**he English language is filled with strange idioms — “happy as a clam” comes to mind, and “the elephant in the room.” These often nonsensical phrases add character to everyday speech, making it feel lived-in and personal.

“Earworm” is one such non-sequitur. Zillennials like me may recall DJ Earworm, [who built a name for himself by posting intoxicating remixes of Top 40 pop on YouTube in the late 2000s](#). In common parlance, an earworm is a musical hook so catchy it gets stuck in your head for hours or days on end. It’s a tuneful phrase so grabby it claws itself into your subconscious, soundtracking your day-to-day. It’s an annoyance, even if it comes from a song you love.

What, then, if the “earworm” isn’t music at all, but the voice of a former abuser?

Mohammad Yaghoubi’s *Earworm* scrapes at the edges of the idiom, making for a sinister, gorgeously conceived exploration of abuse and femicide in post-revolution Iran. When we meet Homa (Aida Keykhaii), she’s a podcaster in Toronto, dressed in fashionable clothing and a chic short haircut. She lives with her son Pendar (Amir Maghami), who’s considering proposing to his girlfriend, Fatemeh (Parya Heravi). Homa and Pendar have a close, loving relationship, especially in the aftermath of the death of Pendar’s father back home in Iran.

But when Fatemeh asks Pendar and his mother to look after her dog while her father (Amir Zavosh) visits Toronto, things change. The past Homa thought she left back home — her captivity in an Iranian prison, her torture at the hands of an evil man with a chest tattoo, her obligation to wear a hijab she hates — isn’t so far away. At the outset of *Earworm*, it might seem that the dog’s yaps are the titular pest, interfering with Homa’s podcasting and driving the mother-son duo crazy with its yapping. But that’s the genius of Yaghoubi’s text — the dog’s barks are a clever red herring, paving the way to a gut-wrenching twist in the play’s back half.

Yaghoubi’s playwriting and directing is in top form here, providing context for the historical treatment of women in Iran without over-explaining it. Homa’s podcast serves as a smart vessel for backstory and cultural circumstances, offering a bridge between the Canadian audience in the studio space of Crow’s Theatre and the human rights abuses happening halfway across the world. Yaghoubi plays with a choose-your-own-adventure structure that capitalizes on the theatre’s intimacy — Homa often asks questions of us, and Keykhaii waits patiently for the answers, making eye contact with each and every patron in the space.

*Earworm* is made all the more compelling by video and projection designs by Ali Mostolizadeh, Honey Hoseiny, and Arman Moghadam, which beam Farsi translations and video snippets onto the bare back wall of Amin Shirazi's set, otherwise populated by fairly nondescript furniture to suggest the crampedness of Toronto apartments. Sound design by Sina Shoaie, too, elevates the experience of both Homa's podcast and the mental anguish the single mother experiences when she meets Fatemeh and her father. Overall, the design is top-notch, making much of little with style and ingenuity.

It's the performances that further punt *Earworm* over the line from good to great. Yaghoubi's team performs *Earworm* in Farsi and English on alternating nights — an impressive feat on its own — and each person onstage overcomes any hurdle imposed by that linguistic challenge to create vivid, deeply felt characters. Keykhai masters the volley from comedy to drama, exploring the depths of each feeling with integrity and craft, making the most of her position as the show's protagonist and lead. Though they have less to say, Maghami, Heravi, and Zavosh, too, fully flesh out the inner conflicts and desires of the people they represent, expertly displaying everything from the turmoil of a father-daughter relationship gone sour to the butterflies of a couple young and in love.

Once again, a Crow's programming choice has proven itself to be ahead of the curve, serving its audience a story they might not have known they wanted. This Nowadays Theatre production is stunning from top to tail, a must-see for anyone who cares about human rights, the power of a familial bond, or great theatre in Toronto.

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*Earworm by Nowadays Theatre runs at Crow's until February 25. Tickets are available [here](#).*

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Aisling is Intermission's senior editor and an award-winning arts journalist with bylines including the Toronto Star, NEXT Magazine, CTV News Toronto, and Maclean's. She likes British playwright Sarah Kane, most songs by Taylor Swift, and her cats, Fig and June.

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