

Theatre Review – Nowadays Theatre in association with Crow's Theatre/Earworm, written and directed by Mohammad Yaghoubi, Studio Theatre, Crow's Theatre, to Mar. 3.

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Aida Keyhaili as Homa in *Earworm*. Photo Dahlia Katz.

Sometimes you can forgive some weak theatrical values because a play is important, and Mohammad Yaghoubi's *Earworm* is such a one.

Yaghoubi, his entire cast, and much of the creative team were born in Iran, and so they know well what life is like under the Ayatollahs – and it is that very life, particularly for an enemy of the regime, that forms the centrepiece of the play.

The structure is very clever, because the first act and the second act, are very different animals.

In the first half of the play, we meet Homa (Aida Keykhaili), a smart, lively, chic, very with-it single mother and her university student son Pendar (Amir Maghami). Homa is a podcaster, discussing topics both personal and political, as well as responding to listeners' requests. One harrowing story she recounts is the 2019 Soccer Suicide about a young girl who sneaks into a stadium, forbidden to women, and sets herself on fire in protest.

As Homa does her broadcasts, a series of eye-catching projections on the wall behind her, graphically underline her words. And kudos to Ali Mostolizadeh, Honey Hoseiny and Arman Moghadam for the visuals. At this point we should also mention set designer Amin Shirazi who has managed to find nondescript pieces of furniture to convey the look of what the apartment might be like of an immigrant family who has limited funds.

As well as listening to Homa's podcasts, we watch her relationship with son Pendar, which is clearly a loving one, but there is a sticking point. Pendar's girlfriend Fatemeh happens to be a very conservative and religious young woman, and much of the dialogue between mother and son revolves around Pendar's pleading with Homa to cover-up and wear a hijab, because they are going to Fatemeh's apartment for dinner to meet her father who is visiting from Iran.

Of course, all of this is an anathema to Homa – the very things she rebelled against in Iran. There is also another reason to be angry about the whole situation. Pendar has had to take in Fatemeh's yappy dog because her father does not believe in dogs in the home. This very annoying dog keeps barking as Homa tries to record her podcast which doesn't help how she feels about the impending dinner. The dog, we later realize, is a harbinger of what is to come. (There is no costume designer listed for the show, but Homa's various outfits tell a story in and of themselves, some being laugh out loud.)

As I said at the beginning of the review, Yaghoubi's structure for the play is very clever. While the first act featuring mother and son has a breezy quality about it, we're about to go into the troubled waters of the second. Yaghoubi has primed us well, and the audience, of course, is now eagerly waiting to meet Fatemeh (Parya Heravi) and her father Mohammad (Amir Zavosh) as the scene changes to their apartment.

We know it is going to be a collision of cultures, but it turns out to be much more than that, which brings us to the term earworm, the title of the play. An earworm is a fragment of a song that pops into one's head, and you can't get rid of it. It happens to us all. In this play, however, earworm has a much more sinister connotation, when Homa hears Mohammad's voice. Needless to say, the second act is loaded with ugly twists and turns that make for compelling, even heart-stopping theatre.

Alas, let's get back to those weak theatrical values I alluded to earlier. Keykhai as Homa is simply magnificent, and she acts rings around her colleagues in what is a Dora nomination-worthy performance. Heravi's Fatemeh is serviceable as is Maghami's Pendar, but his voice at times is barely audible. Unfortunately, Zavosh's Mohammad is underplayed and you can barely hear him. Selected performances of *Earworm* are performed in Farsi (so, in effect. Yaghoubi wrote two plays), which meant having to find four actors who could speak the language. I saw the play in English, but I regret not seeing the Farsi version, which I suspect, would have featured stronger performances.

Nonetheless, *Earworm* is written by an Iranian, and so the very words and situations ring with veracity. The themes and ideas of this play are the real deal, which is why this is an important piece of theatre Canadiana, given that it comes out of the Iranian diaspora, and is based on true events.

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