

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Veils

Tom Coash

Women and War Festival

The Theatre Room, Frederick's Place

6–30 July 2016

The African-American student Intisar (Isaura Barbe-Brown) arrives in Cairo at a very dangerous time in Tom Coash's exciting play *Veils*. It is weeks before the Egyptian revolution, and people are taking to the streets in protest at the ruthless dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak.

She is intending to study Islam and is allocated a college room-share with the Egyptian video journalism student Samar (Zelina Rebeiro). Both are Muslims but Intisar wears a hijab and that makes Samar, who does not wear anything covering her head, uneasy.

Samar wanted to share with a visiting American student because she likes the culture and is thrilled with Intisar's gift of a CD by the American band Public Enemy.

However she is not so happy that Intisar wears the hijab. The various forms of veiling are for her oppressive to women and any one form can lead to others. She argues that "if you let the camel put its nose into the tent, its whole body will follow".

She claims this happened in the Iranian revolution when women first wore the veil as a protest against the regime and then after the revolution were forced to continue to do so by law.

That is why her sympathies are with local schools and colleges in Cairo that are trying to impose a ban on the wearing of the niqab.

But for Intisar, the hijab is a part of her identity and a sign of her religious commitment. It was also, post-9/11, a target for unjust treatment. She recalls being held at an airport while her mother was strip-searched and she was forced to remove her hijab.

As the debate about veiling is argued out on campus, they decide to blog both sides of the debate.

Meanwhile, the streets grow more crowded with protesters against the government pulling Samir into a dangerous struggle in which the regime will kill many before it falls.

The play is fast, witty and extremely moving. The characters are warm, sympathetic and believable. You care a good deal about them and the causes they argue about.

The director Pamela Schermann shows a fine attention to detail, giving the piece a very fluid dramatic tension. The performances of the actors Zelina Rebeiro and Isaura Barbe-Brown are exceptionally good, making even the act of sitting back and simply listening to each other look interesting.

The play was written a number of years ago but it speaks to our time where the arguments about what women should wear continue. In Saudi Arabia, a woman is expected to wear a head covering

and in some parts of the country a long cloak, the abaya. This year, the Egyptian Parliament was drafting a law to ban the wearing of the niqab in public places and government institutions. Meanwhile, Italy and France have passed laws restricting the wearing of a niqab in public places.

Towards the end of the play, as the street protests grow, Samar says of the hijab to Itisar, "I hope I am never forced to wear it and that you are never forced to take it off". It's the simple answer to the veil wars. It's the woman's right to choose what she does with her body.

**Reviewer:** [Keith Mckenna](#)