

*Tales of a City by the Sea – Weekend notes review by Julia Wakefield.*

Following its sold out premiere Melbourne season in 2014, *Tales of a City by the Sea* opened at The Bakehouse Theatre this week.



*Jomana and Rami, played by Osamah Sami*

The author is Palestinian/Australian/Canadian writer [Samah Sabawi](#). She describes her work as 'a poetic journey into the ordinary lives of people living in abnormal circumstances and their struggle to survive'. The play grew out of a collection of poetry that Sabawi wrote while she was in Gaza during the three week bombardment of 2008/2009, prompted by her own experiences and those of her friends and family. She says she is not trying to put across a political message. Although this is a story based on real life events that took place during Israel's assault on Gaza in 2008, its main purpose is to highlight the resilience and compassion that people display in such dire circumstances. In this current era of global conflict and confusion, there are many places featured in news bulletins that are enduring similar situations. Sabawi wants us to see 'the detail of daily lives of people they see for brief seconds on the news'.

The play was originally directed by Lech Mackiewicz, and the current director is Wahibe Moussa. When it opened in Melbourne the plan was to have two simultaneous performances on the West Bank and in Gaza. The play was performed on the West Bank a week later; the script has been read in Gaza but as yet there has been no opportunity to perform the play there.

In the main characters of the play, Jomana and Rami, we see another theme: the gulf between the Palestinian diaspora (those whose families escaped from Gaza and who have grown up in an affluent, privileged society), and the same generation who remain trapped in Gaza. Jomana lives in Gaza, Rami is a doctor raised in Texas by refugee Palestinian parents. They are in love, but in order to enter each other's world they have no choice but to abandon their families and the reality they grew up in.

The play ideally suits the intimate atmosphere of the Bakehouse Theatre. Scenes are evoked with the simplest of props, and Sabawi's poetry slips seamlessly into the characters' dialogue, serving to highlight emotional moments. In some places it appears as a passionate soliloquy, as in Rami's heart rending speech "what price a life?" But it is also there in the play's frequent humorous moments, such as the Dr Zeus style banter that Rami exchanges with his mother. This reference to a familiar Western poetic style serves to emphasize the gap between Rami's and Jomana's upbringing. We realise that Rami, in spite of his heritage, has more experience in common with the audience than he has with Jomana. The contrast is cleverly portrayed in a particularly riveting scene where Jomana is conversing with her father in Gaza, while Rami is simultaneously speaking to his mother in Texas, on either side of a dining table.

Helana Sawires manages to be both intense and ravishingly charming in the role of Jomana, while Osamah Sami plays a totally convincing Rami. The other two main characters in the play, Jomana's optimistic cousin Lama and her faithful fiancé Ali, are skilfully played by Amina Ashman and Reece Vella. Alex Pinder captures our hearts with his sensitive portrayal of Jomana's father, Abu Ahmad, and Rebecca Morton, as Rami's mother, gives us a compelling insight into the quiet agony of an exiled refugee, who has had to turn her back on her family and the land of her birth.

At the beginning, the only music is the unaccompanied voice of a female singer, Aseel Tayah. Although she sings in Arabic we can sense the melancholy of the lyrics. The other sound that begins and ends the play is the relentless pounding of the sea, an indifferent witness to the waves of invaders that have visited its shores, and a symbol of the freedom that is denied to the occupants of a land that has been described as the world's largest open air prison. But despite the pain and despair that is palpably conveyed by this story, the bravery and humour of these ordinary people carries an overriding message of hope that reassures us of one thing: the resilience of the human spirit.

Although Sabawi insists this is not a political play, she is delighted to observe that many young people who watch it are inspired to conduct further research into the plight of the Palestinians. She states that "If they want to investigate afterwards then I have done my job as an artist". She has certainly fulfilled her role in that regard, as the play is now on the Victorian Certificate of Education syllabus.