

Tales of a City by the Sea
Indaily review by Stephen Davenport.

Samah Sabawi, Iara Week and Daniel Clarke.
The Bakehouse Theatre
Until June 18th 2016

Tales of a City by the Sea is a perceptive story that magnificently captures the drama of star-crossed lovers in the besieged Gaza strip.

This is wide-eyed saga of everyday Palestinians struggling to find normality, hope, love, and even survival, in a region affected by hostility. It is an oddly poetic tale, whose complexity and subtleties of differing narrative viewpoint are maintained by axioms, a strong multi-cultural ensemble and superb lead performances.

Samah Sabawi's script has received widespread acclaim for its insight into Palestinian life and the hopes and fears of ordinary people living in a war zone. The playwright's remarkable sensitivity and artistry confers enormous authority on this portrayal of a beleaguered people.

The play focuses on Jomana (Helena Sawires), a Palestinian woman living in a refugee camp, and depicts life under the Israel bombardment and siege. She is chaperone to her cousin Lama (Emina Ashman) who is unhappily engaged to Ali (Reece Vella). When Rami, an American-born Palestinian doctor arrives on the 'Free Gaza' boats in August 2008, he and Jomana fall in love. When it is time to leave, Rami promises to sell his clinic in America and return to Jomana and his ancestral homeland.

The play gives us a prophetic flavour of the way people can culturally, politically, ideologically and physically be separated. There are sharp, pertinent scenes in which the lovers speak over skype and renew their promises. Will the pair live happily ever after?

This play stands or falls by its love affair between the thoroughly decent Texan doctor, Rami, and the poetically romantic Jomana. And this love affair has all the passion of desperate people in desperate times in precarious situations. Sawires is well cast, and she puts presence into every scene and bounces well off Sami who brilliantly portrays an American caught between multiple loyalties.

As doomed wartime romances go, the play doesn't offer anything particularly original. But with palpable tension and poignancy, and an expose of Palestinian life it is fine theatre well worth watching. The action is robust when depicting the havoc wreaked on life, limb and landscape. But perhaps occasionally it is too genteel a view on war's impact on the heart. However, one always gets the sense that the lovers are involved in something that is truly out of their control, and that's the saddest thing of all.