

The Balancing Arab

A Video Play
by Jamil Khoury

Adapted from Jamil Khoury's stage play

63rd and Kedzie: The Arab American Cultural Center

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DEVELOPMENT HISTORY

The Balancing Arab began as a short play entitled *63rd and Kedzie: The Arab American Cultural Center*. *63rd and Kedzie* was commissioned and produced as part of *The Chicago Landmark Project* by Theatre Seven of Chicago, Brian Golden, Artistic Director. *The Chicago Landmark Project* featured twelve short plays by twelve playwrights and ran in June and July of 2011 at Chicago's Greenhouse Theatre Center. In February of 2012, playwright Jamil Khoury and the company he co-founded, Silk Road Theatre Project (now Silk Road Rising), set out to create a video play version of *63rd and Kedzie*, titled *The Balancing Arab*.

The cast of *The Balancing Arab* included:

HANAN
HEIDI

Amira Sabbagh
Leslie Frame

The production team of *The Balancing Arab* included:

Executive Producers

Malik Gillani

Jamil Khoury

Director

Anne Jacques

Assistant Director

Deann Baker

Director of Photography

Drew Pientka

Original Composition

Peter J. Storms

Assistant Camera

Jesse Hibbs

Gaffer

Tim Stotz

Editor

Deann Baker

Script Supervisor

Elias Feghaly

Production Manager

Caitlin Duerinck

Sound Design

Peter J. Storms

Location Sound Mixer

Jason Ssg

Make-Up and Hair

Lydia Pligge

Athletic Consultant

Andrew James Preston

Props Master

Jesse Gaffney

SETTING

The Balancing Arab is set in a gym in downtown Chicago in 2012.

CHARACTERS

HANAN

HEIDI

HANAN

Okay. What's with the silent treatment?

HEIDI

Silent treatment? We're working on the Bosu.

HANAN

I finally get you down to the Arab Community Center, and you don't say a word. Didn't you have fun?

HEIDI

I had a good time. You need to focus on your balance.

HANAN

You left early, and you barely said goodbye. Did I do something wrong?

HEIDI

No. You were talking to your friends. You had family there. I didn't want to intrude.

HANAN

You were my guest, Heidi!

HEIDI

We're doing twelve reps of each set.

HANAN

I know what I'm doing, and you're dodging the question.

HEIDI

It was a new experience for me. It was, I don't know, it was different. I'm still processing.

HANAN

Different as in good different or weird different or get me the hell away from all these crazy Arabs different?

HEIDI

I was really touched when you invited me. It meant a great deal to me. And, I have never been to the Arab American Cultural Center.

HANAN

I wanted you to experience my world. We're always here, in your world.

HEIDI

Come on, this gym is as much yours as it is mine.

HANAN

So what do you mean by "I'm still processing?"

HEIDI

I'm processing. Look, I loved the music, and the dancing, and the food, my God, it was delicious!

HANAN

But?

HEIDI

I thought it would have been better without the politics. It got a little heated for my tastes.

HANAN

The politics?

HEIDI

Squats next. Remember your form. I had an issue with that woman who was, I don't know, the MC for the evening.

HANAN

Suheila?

HEIDI

Is she a friend of yours?

HANAN

More like a friend of my parents, but I thought Suheila was great. I mean, she was funny. She told jokes. She kept the evening moving along. No small feat in my community.

HEIDI

Look, I don't want to offend you or anything...

HANAN

You're my personal trainer. Speak your mind, woman!

HEIDI

What was all that stuff about "Stop America's racist war against our people!" "Fight the American imperialists!"

HANAN

Come on. Arabs are very hyperbolic.

HEIDI

That woman had a lot of anger. A lot of anti-American anger.

HANAN

Okay. U.S. policy in the Middle East knows three things - Israel, Arab dictators, and oil. And America happens to love all three. As for the Arab people, eh, not so interested.

HEIDI

Look, I am not defending U.S. foreign policy, okay, but for a moment there, I forgot what country I was in.

HANAN

Yeah, somewhere between Midway Airport and Abu Ghraib! Look, you just have to understand the political culture in the Arab world. It's all about melodrama and fiery speeches. Suheila and company, they're all immigrants.

HEIDI

Fiery speeches incite action.

HANAN

Not in the Arab American community. No, we prefer words to action.

HEIDI

Good job. Rest. The way that Suheila would say the word "America." With such utter contempt and disdain.

HANAN

It was probably her accent that threw you.

HEIDI

No. And it wasn't just her. The other speakers... "American," "Americans" were like bad words. And I'm standing there thinking - they're talking about me.

HANAN

I'm sorry, were we at the same event Saturday night?

HEIDI

Hanan, honestly speaking, as the only white girl in the room, I didn't feel safe.

HANAN

What? Why? People were thrilled that I brought you. They kept asking about you. "Who's that pretty American girl?"

HEIDI

How was I to know? They were speaking to you in Arabic. People were pointing at me and smiling, in this like really odd way.

HANAN

It's the culture. We're not terribly discreet about...you know, pointing, and space issues. Balance ball next?

HEIDI

Your favorite. But why was I being referred to as "the American girl?" Aren't we all American?

HANAN

Well, yeah, but for Arabs, Americans are white people.

HEIDI

White people?

HANAN

You know, I was bragging to everyone about you. "That's her, that's Heidi, my personal trainer, the one who helped me lose all the weight, helped me reverse my diabetes."

HEIDI

That is so sweet of you, Hanan. My God, I feel terrible for having said anything...

HANAN

Don't. I need to hear it. It's so easy to get up in one's own bubble.

(short pause, then laughs)

The community hasn't forgotten how fat I was.

HEIDI

Listen, the weight loss, the diabetes. That's your accomplishment. You did that work.

HANAN

Yes, but you helped me, big time. I'm indebted to you.

HEIDI

I'm doing my job.

HANAN

But you went above and beyond. You saved my life, girlfriend.

HEIDI

I love helping people. That's why I'm a trainer. Besides, you give me beaucoup bragging rights, Ms. Fitness sensation!

HANAN

Now that's more like it.

HEIDI

Take a rest.

HANAN

Okay. "Is that American girl on our side? Does she feel for us?" The questions Arabs ask - it's unbelievable.

HEIDI

Am I on their side? What does that mean?

HANAN

Is she friend or foe, it's...feelings in the Arab American community are very raw these days. People feel vulnerable. They're insecure. And you can hardly blame 'em. Being on the defensive all the time...

HEIDI

Well not to sound callous, but anti-American slogans doesn't exactly endear people to your cause.

HANAN

There was nothing anti-American. Granted, Suheila could have been more diplomatic. She was a bit unpolished. You know, it makes more sense in Arabic. Or maybe not.

HEIDI

Makes more sense in Arabic? Standing reaches.

HANAN

I'm in Beitounia, in the West Bank, visiting family. And my six year old nephew Ramzi - adorable little boy - comes up to me and he hands me a bunch of "rubber bullets." Rubber coated metal bullets that Israelis shoot at Palestinian children. So he hands me the bullets and he says "Auntie Hanan, can you please tell America to stop sending these?" It turns out they're made in Pennsylvania!

HEIDI

I am horrified at what Israel does. And I really feel for your family there. And I'm also horrified at what Arab governments do to their own people.

HANAN

No argument there.

HEIDI

And why only Arab flags at the Arab American Cultural Center? Why not an American flag?

HANAN

Yeah there should be an American flag. I agree. I've complained about that myself.

(mumbles to self)

To no avail.

HEIDI

I kept wondering where exactly is the American in Arab American?

HANAN

Well, it was an event celebrating Arab heritage! I'd say that's pretty American. I mean, you wear green on St. Patrick's Day.

HEIDI

But my family raised us to be fiercely proud of being American. We're taught to love this country. And not uncritically mind you.

HANAN

Great! I love this country too! And I'm damn critical of it.

HEIDI

I'm not talking about you, Hanan. I don't see you as one of them.

HANAN

Wait. One of them? What the hell is that?

HEIDI

I'm sorry. That came out wrong. I guess what I'm trying to say is...I see you as American first.

HANAN

Well, yeah, sure, of course, but I am damn proud of who I am. Okay. I'm American. I'm Arab. I'm Palestinian. I'm Muslim. I'm a Chicagoan. I'm an accountant. I'm a piano player. I'm a wannabe jock...

(both laugh)

HEIDI

And I'm a whole lot of things as well. But I don't hyphenate my Americanness.

HANAN

Well, you and I don't walk in the same shoes now, do we?

HEIDI

One of the speakers at the event, that older man with the white hair and the cheesy mustache, was going on and on about all the "horrible things" the "criminal Americans" are doing to our people in Iraq. Criminal Americans? Do you realize that my cousin Brian lost his leg in Iraq trying to prevent Iraqis from slaughtering each other?

HANAN

Look, I'm sorry to hear about your cousin, but that was one man's opinion. He doesn't represent me, and he certainly doesn't represent the entire Arab community.

HEIDI

You know what I wanted to say to that guy? "Whose side are you on? Because if we're then enemy, then get the hell out of here!"

HANAN

Whoa, what the hell is this? A Toby Keith concert? America - love it or leave it! Heidi, you are so much better than that.

HEIDI

You know what, we should probably end this conversation. We're starting to hurt each other's feelings. I'll put the Bosu away.

HANAN

And what are you picking on Arabs for? What, we don't have enough enemies as it is?

HEIDI

I am hardly your enemy. But then again, according to the Arab American Cultural Center...

HANAN

Okay stop! Look, I was born here. But my parents, and all their friends, they're from the old country.

(MORE)

HANAN (CONT'D)

It is hard being an immigrant, Heidi. Really hard. So before you start asking anyone to take a loyalty oath...

HEIDI

A man grabs a microphone and screams "First Israel, then America." Gee, I wonder what he's talking about?

HANAN

I don't ever remember that being said. In fact, it wasn't.

HEIDI

Oh, it most certainly was. And no one batted an eye.

HANAN

You know, with all due respect...I thought you were this big liberal? How about a little empathy? Those speakers, the ones who so riled you up, those people have horror stories. They are people who fled for their lives. Palestinians, Iraqis, Lebanese, Syrians...

HEIDI

Yes, and America gave them a home where they could be safe and free and prosperous. My ancestors were from Ireland, and they were grateful to be in this country.

HANAN

Oh what, and we're a bunch of ingrates?

HEIDI

Don't forget to stretch out your abdominals.

Heidi helps Hanan stretch her core.

HANAN

You think if you moved to China tomorrow, and spent the rest of your life there, that you'd stop being an American. That you'd stop speaking English? Stop hanging out with other Americans? Sure, you might learn Chinese? You might even master the culture, try and fit in, but you'll never be Chinese.

HEIDI

I'll never be Chinese because being Chinese is an ethnicity. That's the great thing about this country, anyone can become an American. It's not about blood. It's about ideals and beliefs and shared values. That's the beauty of the American melting pot.

HANAN

Yeah, well I don't want to be thrown into a pot and melted, okay? We're not fondue, we're a frickin' salad bowl. You're a tomato, I'm a green pepper, we're each unique, but part of the same, delicious salad.

HEIDI

Well I happen to love fondue but fine, we'll be a salad bowl, but if the cucumber is always flicking croutons at the radish...

HANAN

Well then it makes for one zesty, colorful salad!

HEIDI

(laughs)

Do you think all this exercise is short circuiting our brains?

HANAN

Yes, but at least we've got abs of steel!

HEIDI

(looks at watch)

Look, I've got another client coming. But we're still on for Wednesday, right?

HANAN

10:00am. We'll continue with the Bosu?

HEIDI

Actually Wednesday I'd like us to do some machines. We need to focus on shoulders and arms.

END OF PLAY