

JUMP FOR JORDAN DONNA ABELA



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Ambushed by History

Jump for Jordan is a shimmering, shifting kaleidoscope of a play. It offers fragments of character, splashes of narrative, glimpses of family history, plus plenty of generational conflict and sibling rivalry. The play reflects on the experience of leaving home – as a migrant, as a refugee, as an aspiring archaeologist, as a twenty-year-old, as a lesbian. It is funny, but also moving, and it asks audiences to consider seeing things a little differently: shifting their point of view, asking questions about prejudices, turning some light on blind spots.

At the centre of this Sydney play is a family with its roots in Jordan and Palestine. At a time when, for many, this area of the world is primarily associated with conflict, the plight of refugees, and the tactical deployment of terror, *Jump for Jordan* invites us to rethink. Jordan is a cradle of civilisation, Petra an archaeological treasure house, Amman a sophisticated city. While Jordan is, as Sophie's father Sahir tells us, 'the most invaded place on earth', its namesake river winds its way through the sacred texts of three world religions – Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

By contrast, in the fears and fantasies of Sophie, the central character in *Jump for Jordan*, her mother's country is a place where unwilling brides can be bundled into marriage. The news that her Aunt Azza is to visit Australia unleashes Sophie's unease, even her nightmares, in relation to her cultural heritage. Avenging Azza is the result, a caricature that plays to every negative stereotype of Arab-woman-as-cultural-policewoman. As a comic Fury, Avenging Azza produces a magic carpet in order to whisk Sophie off to force her to marry 'Hairy Toothless Tarek'. But in reality, Azza is an educated, compassionate woman, concerned about her nieces and demanding of her sister Mara: 'Why are your daughters so miserable?'

One reason Sophie finds it hard to connect with the real Azza is because Sophie can only communicate with her by means of Mara. Because Sophie cannot speak Arabic and Azza cannot speak English, the bi-lingual Mara is in complete control, translating and mistranslating to create the meanings and the histories she desires. *Jump for Jordan* is

theatrically ambitious its representation of different levels of language competence by means of different accents and fluency. So Azza speaks fluent English when in the storyline she is speaking Arabic. When Azza tries to speak English it is heavily accented and broken. This device keeps the audience on their toes but what is very clear is that, by the end of the play, Sophie and Azza are managing to reach out to each other. Sophie is beginning to learn Arabic, and, in stilted English, Azza has told something of the story of Layla – Sophie’s other aunt, who was Sahir’s sister and Azza’s dear friend and fellow teacher. Azza remarks on how closely Sophie resembles Layla physically, invoking another kind of ‘archaeology’, that of genes and heritage on a biological and physiological level. And when Sophie’s partner Sam conducts an archaeological analysis of the battered copy of *Alice in Wonderland* that once belonged to Layla, this begins to open another door for Sophie. As Azza explains in her broken English, Layla valued the book because ‘Alice think free’. Perhaps Sophie will also soon be able to begin to ‘think free’.

Jump for Jordan reminds us that we only know our nearest and dearest in part; we don’t fully understand the journeys our parents made, and we won’t fully understand the journeys our children are making. We can only excavate, like the aspiring archaeologists Sophie and Sam. We can get out our trowels, uncover the artefacts, look at the photographs, but how do we know we are not misreading what we see? Sophie knows her dad was from Palestine but has no idea why he fled to Australia:

He escaped or something. Walked north to Lebanon.

Mara has buried the family trauma that brought Sahir to Australia. She has covered it with layers of lies and false appearances, trapped by her expatriate – and dangerously nostalgic – memory of an Amman and a Jordan that have moved on. After Sahir’s death, Mara is the gatekeeper of family knowledge until Azza arrives and encourages Sophie to excavate.

Jump for Jordan has five women at its centre: Sophie, her sister Loren, her mother Mara, her aunt Azza, and her partner Sam. All are affected by what happened to another woman, Layla. Focusing on women in this way is still not that common in mainstream theatre. *Jump for Jordan* is also unorthodox in the dramaturgy the play offers: slivers,

impressions, history intermingled with the present, facts alongside fantasies, science alongside dreams, desires alongside archaeology. The play presents a dramatic quicksand and the audience won't be able to grasp hold of everything they want to excavate. When did Sophie's gentle dad, Sahir, die? Will Sophie conquer Arabic? Or will she give up as she has done with so many university courses? And will Mara and Sophie ever manage to talk without rowing?

When Azza tells her sister Mara, 'You were ambushed by history. Most people are,' she is trying to galvanise Mara to stop feeling self-pity. But, of course, everyone gets caught up in, if not ambushed by, history. Some, like Mara and her family, are ambushed by the big events of history – world affairs, wars, terrorism. Sahir fled for his life and Mara followed reluctantly, abandoning the home she loved. Meanwhile others struggle with the pressures of local or family history and are ambushed by unexpected illness or death. But the play itself has also been ambushed by history. When Sam asked Sophie 'Would you marry me? Would you?' in the first production in 2014, the postal survey on same-sex marriage was still three years in the future. I am writing this just one week after Australia voted yes. I hope Sophie is jumping for joy.

Elizabeth Schafer

November 2017

Elizabeth Schafer is Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies
at Royal Holloway, University of London.

Jump for Jordan was first produced by Griffin Theatre Company at SBW Stables Theatre, Sydney, on 14 February 2014, with the following cast:

SOPHIE	Alice Ansara
SAM	Anna Houston
LOREN	Sheridan Harbridge
MARA	Doris Younane
SAHIR	Sal Sharah
AZZA	Camilla Ah Kin

Director, Iain Sinclair

Designer, Pip Runciman

Lighting Designer, Nicholas Rayment

Composer & Sound Designer, Nate Edmondson

Dramaturg, Jennifer Medway

Stage Manager, Edwina Guinness

PRODUCTION NOTES

Like the strata of occupation in a disturbed archaeological dig site, the scenes in this play are often constructed of layers of narrative that collapse in on each other. A sequential reading is interrupted, and only fragments of what happened are offered. Attention must be on context as well as content. The borders between scenes are intended to be porous.

LANGUAGE NOTES

Jump For Jordan is a bi-lingual play written almost entirely in English. Generally, when characters speak in their first language, the syntax is complex; when they speak in their second language, the syntax is simple. In the first production, accents were also used to denote first and second language. When characters spoke in their first language, actors used Australian accents; when characters spoke in their second language, actors used Arabic accents, and sometimes converted verbs to the present simple tense. Being a product of Sophia's imagination, and a caricature, Avenging Azza is an exception; her language is complex, and in production, was heavily accented in Arabic. Clarity in the bi-lingual scenes depends on knowing to whom each line is directed.

CHARACTERS

SOPHIE, a would-be archaeologist

SAM / STUDENT SAM / TRUCKIE SAM, partner

LOREN, sister

MARA / YOUNG MARA, mother, from Jordan

SAHIR / YOUNG SAHIR, father, from Palestine

AZZA / AVENGING AZZA, aunt, from Jordan

‘Multiple’ characters (e.g. MARA / YOUNG MARA) are different iterations that are either real, remembered, or imagined by Sophie. All iterations of a character are to be played by the same actor. Six actors are required in total.

SETTING

The play is set in Sydney’s West and Inner West. More broadly, it is set in Sophie’s fluctuating levels of consciousness: reality, memory, gleaned family history, anxious projection, and insomnia-induced conversations with the dead.

PART ONE

1.

Present: Flat. SOPHIE rifles through clothes.

Past: House. MARA yells at LOREN.

Past: Sophie's workplace. LOREN yells at SOPHIE.

LOREN: Mum was shattered when you left.

MARA: Why didn't you talk to her? Why didn't you find out?

LOREN: No warning. Just pissed off and dumped me in the shit.

MARA: Sisters tells sisters everything!

LOREN: Not one fight with Mum that week. Should've guessed.

MARA: You knew. You helped her.

LOREN: I copped it big time.

MARA: Weren't a good enough sister.

LOREN: Her guilt and crap.

MARA: No phone number, no address, she could be dead in Kings Cross!

LOREN: Drama queen!

MARA: How could she do this?

LOREN: Run away at twenty-one! Shit, Sophie, no-one does that.

MARA: Books in a taxi! Bras in the gutter! Neighbours saw everything!

SAM: Sophie.

SOPHIE: What?

MARA: You stupid

LOREN: impulsive

MARA: unmarried

LOREN: brat!

A jet screams overhead.

2.

Imagination: Airport. Customs. AVENGING AZZA enters.

VOICEOVER: Welcome to Australia, land of drought and sweeping drama queens. Anything to declare?

AVENGING AZZA *opens her bag and declares various weapons.*

Thank you. Enjoy your stay.

AVENGING AZZA *nods and exits.*

3.

Recent past: House. SOPHIE is at the front door.

SOPHIE: Mum. Do you have cancer?

MARA: No.

SOPHIE: Are you sick?

MARA: No.

SOPHIE: So, why the frantic call from Loren? *Sophie, get your arse over here now?*

MARA: Loren doesn't swear.

SOPHIE: Does *she* have cancer?

MARA: No.

SOPHIE: She said the word *emergency*. I was literally imagining the worst on the train. Pussy sores, oxygen tanks.

MARA: There's a wedding.

SOPHIE: Oh.

MARA: My second daughter is marrying first.

SOPHIE: She could've mentioned it.

MARA: The look on their faces.

SOPHIE: What are you talking about?

MARA: Vince's parents.

SOPHIE: Vince is the groom?

MARA: I told them. They couldn't believe it. *My eldest daughter, I don't know where she lives!*

SOPHIE: You *do* know.

MARA: For months I didn't.

SOPHIE: And for three years, you totally disowned me. For the last three years, you acted like I didn't exist.

MARA: Azza is coming.

SOPHIE: Who?

MARA: Your aunt.

SOPHIE: When?

MARA: Next month. *I'm coming to the wedding, pick me up, I'll be there on the sixth.* As if she's my boss.

SOPHIE: Aunty Azza?

MARA: Fifteen years no contact. Then she smells a wedding. Can't fly here quick enough.

SOPHIE: She did make contact. She sent cards, remember, which you wouldn't let us open.

MARA: Sophia. In Jordan, you could have been killed. Had your ears cut off for not listening.

4.

Present: Flat. SAM checks on SOPHIE who is rifling through clothes.

SAM: Sophie.

SOPHIE: What?

SAM: Have you slept yet?

SOPHIE: Do you think Mum'll tell her? She'll tell her. She's her sister. She has every right to tell her sister what happened.

SAM: It's three a.m.

SOPHIE: What if right now they're sobbing in my bedroom? If Azza and Mum are having this completely extreme empathy session? Which honestly, that's fine, it's their moment.

SAM: Come to bed.

SOPHIE: Azza would've got through customs, would've seen Mum at the gate with just Loren, not me, and she would've spent the whole car trip home going, *Where's Sophie?* And Mum would've been like, *Don't worry, we'll talk about it later.* Try to sway her from thinking, *Where's Sophie?* with stupid crap questions like, *Are you good? Was the flight good? Was the weather good when you left Amman?*

SAM: I'm turning the light off.

SOPHIE: I'm so gonna get pelted. *Why'd you run away? Why don't you have a husband? Why are you such a brat?*

SAM: You're not a brat.

SOPHIE: Not specifically, but—

SAM: You're overexcited.

SOPHIE: And my aunt's nearly sixty. She'll be stuck in the Dark Ages, probably.

SAM: Sophie, you're totally up for this. We've devised a plan. Gone through the whole meeting process.

SOPHIE: Yep. Right. Chill.

SAM: Keep it low-key. Don't get provoked.

SOPHIE: But what if it gets out-of-hand emotional?

SAM: You lower your voice. You count to three, and say...?

SOPHIE: *Okay, I have to go, I'll call you tomorrow.*

SAM: Koala stamp. Goodnight.

SOPHIE: But, Sam, she's my aunty. I was in school when I last saw her, primary school, I was like ten.

SAM: Well, in that case, just spew your guts up. Guilt trips, tantrum attacks, not part of the plan, but I'm pretty sure you can handle it.

SOPHIE: Really?

SAM: No.

SOPHIE: Okay. You're right. Thanks, Sam. I'm on it.

5.

Recent past: House. SOPHIE is at the front door.

MARA: The wedding. You have to come. Loren wants family. Azza will expect you.

SOPHIE: Does she know I ran away?

MARA: No.

SOPHIE: Will you tell her?

MARA: Will you move back home?

SOPHIE: I knew you'd—

MARA: Come home. Sleep here. I can measure you as I sew. Not have to unpick each time you visit.

SOPHIE: Unpick?

MARA: Your dress. You're one of five bridesmaids. We dropped one to make room for you.

SOPHIE: Bet *that* went down well.

MARA: Not interested? Okay. Go.

SOPHIE: Wait. I'm a bridesmaid?

MARA: Yes.

SOPHIE: What are the dresses like?

MARA: Off-the-shoulder, pleated bodice, cocktail length, in emerald.

SOPHIE: That's hotter than I expected.

MARA: Vince's sisters, all beautiful, all the same size. But you, look at you. Thick legs, long waist, no bust. I'll have to mix up three sizes to make your dress fit properly.

SOPHIE: Primmed-up and pretty. Good luck.

MARA: Too hard? No problem. Leave.

SOPHIE: Mum—

MARA: Three more years, go.

SOPHIE: All I meant was, I'm not super girlie, or good in heels, I'll just—

MARA: You can pick your own shoes.

SOPHIE: Really?

MARA: They have to be black.

SOPHIE: Fine... Do you really want me in the bridal party in front of potential relatives?

MARA: ... Yes.

SOPHIE: Mainly because of Azza, right?

MARA: And Loren.

SOPHIE: And afterwards?

MARA: You can keep the dress.

SOPHIE: Oh.

MARA: And maybe...

SOPHIE: Come for Christmas?

MARA: Let's do the wedding first.

MARA *exits*.

Imagination: SAHIR *enters*.

SAHIR: Jordan means *the one who descends*.

SOPHIE: Dad?

SAHIR *walks*. SOPHIE *follows*.

6.

Imagination: SAHIR *and* SOPHIE *walk*.

SAHIR: I bought the highest block of land. A quarter acre on top of the

hill. I walked from Campbelltown station. The road was brand new. Sticky with bitumen and still without street lights. When I found the display home, I sat on the front step. Other people arrived with sleeping bags and sandwiches, but I was the first.

SOPHIE: Dad, did you ever have insomnia? It feels like withdrawals, but I don't know from what? If it hits 3 a.m. and I'm still awake, I go for a walk like we used to. And I think of you walking out of the lowest depression on earth. Up through the Rift Valley, treading on artefacts, probably, I so wanted to discover.

SAHIR: I stayed awake all night. When the saleslady came in the morning, I signed the contract, gave her a cheque for all the money we had. Then I ran through paddocks of grabbing grass up to our block on the top of the hill. The wind was strong. My clothes were like whips.

7.

Present: Flat. SOPHIE is still rifling through clothes.

Past: House. MARA yells at LOREN.

Past: Sophie's workplace. LOREN yells at SOPHIE.

MARA: Ring someone! Where is she? Who is she with?

SOPHIE: Sam?

LOREN: You're a complete dick.

MARA: In the street like a bag lady!

LOREN: What the fuck were you thinking?

SOPHIE: You awake?

LOREN: You've left me with Mum. One on one. That sucks.

MARA: I wanted children who would not shame me like this!

LOREN: Did it feel liberating shoving your life into garbage bags?

MARA: Treating my trust like rubbish!

LOREN: You left knickers on the lawn. We had to pick them up with tongs.

MARA: Unforgivable.

LOREN: This is the dumbest fucking thing you've ever done.

SOPHIE: Sam?

MARA: From this minute, my disgraceful daughter does not exist.

SOPHIE: I think I'm having a panic attack.