



CurtainUp

A *CurtainUp* Review *Damascus*

By Elyse Sommer

The English are terrible negotiators. That is why they so often end up in wars. Scottish English it's the same thing. In Damascus, it is the same thing.—Elena the glamorous omnipresent lounge pianist who observes and comments, like a Greek chorus, but with the accent of her native Ukraine.



Ewen Bremner (Paul), Nathalie Armin (Muna) in *Damascus*
(Photo: Carol Rosegg)

The question "when does he sleep?" comes to mind with any mention of David Greig's name. Besides turning out a prodigious number of plays, he has adapted and translated. In addition he's found time to participate in an artistic exchange program with young people involved with theater in the Middle East, especially in Syria and Palestine. It is that exchange program, during which he led several workshops aimed at introducing young Arab writers to the techniques of new British playwriting, that seeded *Damascus*, winner of the Scotsman Fringe First Award at the 2007 Edinburgh Festival and one of two of his plays presented as part of the popular Brits Off-Broadway series.

This stylishly staged play is about Paul Hartsone (Ewen Bremner), a Scotsman who has authored a textbook series geared to today's multi-cultural British school population. His publisher thinks that this broader perspective also makes these books viable for Arab schools. In order to attend another meeting in the Carribean, the publisher has persuaded his author take his place pitching the books to a group of Syrian educators. It's a not unfamiliar set-up: A foreigner stumbles into a place with whose people he's had

no previous contact and whose language he cannot speak. The language barrier beefs up both serious and comic potential.

While a well written but minor addition to plays that aim to promote a better understanding between the West and Middle East, *Damascus*, unlike Greig's *American Pilot* (see link to review below), doesn't fully realize its potential as a serious, gripping drama. It's also too long for what it has to say. That said, it is nevertheless entertaining and does quite well in the comic department.

While Theater A is the 59E59 complex's largest theater, its stage is small enough to be challenging; and so, for starters, compliments to director Philip Howard and designer Anthony Macilwaine for transforming it into a two-tier, third-rate Damascus hotel lobby that has the aura of a noirish romantic thriller. To establish the sense that we're in a dangerous place a picture of Syria's dictator-president Bashar al-Assad hangs over the reception desk and the images flashing at all times across a large television screen at the rear of the lobby attest to the fact that Paul is in a war zone where danger makes flying in and out of the country a risky business.

The baby grand piano on a little balcony atop a circular staircase adds to the old movie aura. It is from here that Elena (Doyla Gavanski), the slinky omnipresent lounge pianist observes and comments on the hotel guests like a Greek chorus, but with the accent of her native Ukraine. And so, with Elena to guide us with her music and narration from above, Paul is in the hotel's main lounge dealing with the play's three Arab characters. There's Zakaria (Khalid Laith), the aggressively helpful desk clerk with an intense interest in sex with Western women and ambitions of having the life story he's written made into a Hollywood flick. Then we have the Syrians to whom Paul is to pitch his textbooks: Wasim (Alex Elliott), the main decision-making contact who speaks no English and Muna (Nathalie Armin), his assistant, who it turns out was his student and lover before he became a bureaucrat (and disappointed, disgruntled poet). Since Paul's rusty French hardly makes for a meaningful interchange with Wasim, the English

speaking Muna becomes his translator and Paul's main contact. Her translation are often amusingly edited, more as she sees fit than accurate.

Given the filmic atmosphere, it's hardly surprising that the happily married Paul (he's constantly on the phone to his wife) finds himself not only battling for the book deal but to remain faithful to his far away wife. Nor does it come as a shock that the emotionally contained Muna finds herself drawn to the Scotch innocent abroad, especially since she's clearly disillusioned with her former lover and the compromises Syrian political correctness demand.

True to my earlier statement that *Damascus* succeeds better with its comic than its more serious political aspects, the highlight of Paul-Muna relationship —and the play itself— is a scene in which they go through his books to explore ways in which they could be made acceptable to the Syrian authorities. Muna's reasoning for what makes elements of the text objectionable is of course not just about the books, but about the whole Mideastern issues vis-a-vis religious fundamentalism. If the whole play was this funny and incisive, it would be brilliant.

The cast has had plenty of time to fine tune their performances and director Philip Howard has seen to it that they continue to perform at the top of their game. The only newcomer in New York is Ewen Bremner as the main character. He fits right in with the ensemble, and does a wonderful job of portraying the ordinary Scotchman temporarily dislodged from his comfortably married, Westernized ordinariness.

While Greig is something of a star of the current Brits Off-Broadway Festival, there are a number of intriguing offerings left. See our [Festival page](#).