

# SAMI IN PARADISE



1 - 29 APRIL 2018

## LEARNING RESOURCES

BELVOIR



**Belvoir presents**  
**SAMI IN PARADISE**

Based on *The Suicide* by **NIKOLAI ERDMAN**

Adapted by **EAMON FLACK & THE COMPANY**

Directed by **EAMON FLACK**

This production of *Sami in Paradise* opened at Belvoir St Theatre on Thursday 5 April 2018.

Set & Costume Designer **DALE FERGUSON**

Lighting Designer **VERITY HAMPSON**

Musical Direction, Sound Design & Composer **JETHRO WOODWARD**

(in collaboration with **MAHAN GHOBADI & HAMED SADEGHI**)

Movement Director **NIGEL POULTON**

Dialect Coach **AMY HUME**

Assistant Director **CARISSA LICCIARDELLO**

Stage Manager **LUKE McGETTIGAN**

Assistant Stage Manager **BROOKE KISS**

Stage Management Secondment **KATHERINE MOORE**

With

**PAULA ARUNDELL** as Fima/Fairuz

**FAYSSAL BAZZI** as Abu Walid

**NANCY DENIS** as Adnan/Sanda

**CHARLIE GARBER** as Charlie Gerber

**VICTORIA HARALABIDOU** as Maria

**MARTA KACZMAREK** as Gita

**MANDELA MATHIA** as Owke

**ARKY MICHAEL** as Father Arky

**YALIN OZUCELIK** as Sami

**HAZEM SHAMMAS** as Hazem

**VAISHNAVI SURYAPRAKASH** as Vaish/Boy/Waiter

Musicians

**MAHAN GHOBADI** Percussion

**HAMED SADEGHI** Strings

*Sami in Paradise* is supported by Nelson Meers Foundation.

We acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation who are the traditional custodians of the land on which Belvoir St Theatre is built. We also pay respect to the Elders past and present, and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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# ABOUT BELVOIR



**One building.**

**Six hundred people.**

**Thousands of stories.**

When the Nimrod Theatre building in Belvoir Street, Surry Hills, was threatened with redevelopment in 1984, more than 600 people – ardent theatre lovers together with arts, entertainment and media professionals – formed a syndicate to buy the building and save this unique performance space in inner city Sydney.

Thirty years later, under Artistic Director Eamon Flack and Executive Director Sue Donnelly, Belvoir engages Australia's most prominent and promising playwrights, directors, actors and designers to realise an annual season of work that is dynamic, challenging and visionary. As well as performing at home, Belvoir regularly takes to the road, touring both nationally and internationally.

## **Belvoir Education**

Our Education Program provides students and teachers with insights into the work of Belvoir and first hand experiences of the theatre-making process.

Belvoir Education offers student workshops, teacher professional development workshops, work experience, VET placements, archival viewings and a wealth of online resources designed to support work in the drama classroom. Our arts access programs assist schools in Regional NSW and Western Sydney to access the company's work.

Explore our education pages at [www.belvoir.com.au/education](http://www.belvoir.com.au/education)



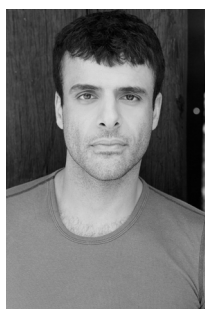
# CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM



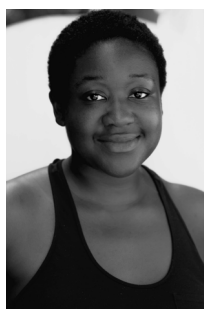
Eamon Flack  
Director



Paula Arundell  
Fima/Fairuz



Fayssal Bazzi  
Abu Walid



Nancy Denis  
Adnan/Sanda



Dale Ferguson  
Set & Costume  
Designer



Charlie Garber  
Charlie Gerber



Mahan Ghobadi  
Percussion



Verity Hampson  
Lighting Designer



Victoria  
Haralabidou  
Maria



Amy Hume  
Dialect Coach



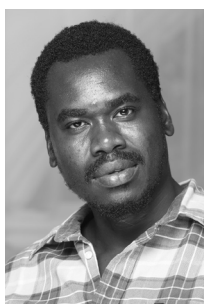
Marta Kaczmarek  
Gita



Brooke Kiss  
Assistant Stage  
Manager



Carissa  
Licciardello  
Assistant Director



Mandela Mathia  
Owke



Luke McGettigan  
Stage Manager



Arky Michael  
Father Arky



Yalin Ozucelik  
Sami



Nigel Poulton  
Movement Director



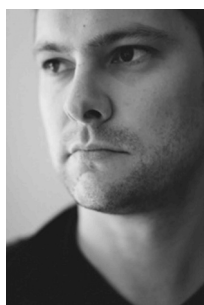
Hamed Sadeghi  
Strings



Hazem Shammam  
Hazem



Vaishnavi  
Suryaprakash  
Vaish/Boy/Waiter



Jethro Woodward  
Musical Direction,  
Sound Design &  
Composer

# ADAPTOR & DIRECTOR'S NOTE: EAMON FLACK

This is a comedy set in a refugee camp. There are more than 65 million displaced people in the world today – refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people. They have been driven from their homes by war, environmental crisis, persecution, economic collapse. Millions of them live in camps, and their lives and fates are ruled by a weird mix of international and domestic law, managerial rulemaking, and NGO patronage. Some of these camps are generations old (for example, the Palestinian camps in Lebanon, which date back to the 1940s), some are very new (the now-closed Calais Jungle, Zaatari in Jordan). Some are small, spontaneous affairs (on Lesbos in Greece, for example), some are large towns in their own right (Dadaab in Kenya has a population of about 250,000). Some camps have thriving grey-market economies, university campuses, healthcare, sports teams, even theatres. Some have almost nothing. Some people are grateful for refuge, some are undone by their incarceration. Some find that their lives have new horizons, many (most) find that they are living a permanent existence of temporariness, unable to think about the lives they have lost and unable to conceive of any kind of future. Some just want to go home, some want to make new lives where they are, some want to get out of there and keep going. Life here is philosophical, essential, desperate, raw, naked, ancient and frequently ridiculous.

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*Sami in Paradise* is based on a Soviet comedy called *The Suicide*. It was written by Nikolai Erdman in 1928, ten years after the Bolshevik Revolution (really it was a coup) had put a marginal group of political oddbods in charge of one of the largest countries on earth. By 1928 enough time had passed for Erdman and many others in the Soviet Union to see the Revolution for what it was: a weird experiment that could only work if humans were less human than they are. Two things could happen at this point: one, the Revolution could give up and admit its analysis of the situation was wrong, or two, it could set about trying to change humans to fit the analysis. Stalin chose the latter, and a regime of bizarre brutality was born. Erdman's brilliant insight was to see that this regime was not just violent, it was also ridiculous. The logic of the Revolution was bonkers. Erdman's basically saying, if you want to show the Revolution naked for what it was, write a comedy.

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We've made this show together. I wrote the adaptation in the sense that I did most of the typing, but the research and ideas that went into it have come from everyone involved. Over a period of several months we gathered hundreds of pages of research and dozens of hours of video content from a variety of sources, including self-made media projects within the camps. Everywhere we looked in the research we found quotations, people, events which bore an uncanny similarity to lines, characters and situations in the play. Why would life as a refugee bear such a resemblance to life in Stalin's Russia? Perhaps because both regimes seek to treat people as a problem to be solved...

In terms of what's Erdman's and what's ours, I'd say about 15% of the play is new material and the rest is a restating of Erdman in a different setting. We've changed the time and place of the play but the plot, structure and characters (with some exceptions) are all more or less Erdman's. We've changed all the names except Maria's. The big changes we've made have been to some of the characters. Charlie Gerber in the Erdman was a member of the Russian Intelligentsia; here he is the CEO of his own NGO, and his scenes were co-written by Charlie Garber and I. Fairuz in the original was a figure of Russian romanticism who was driven entirely by jealousy; we've invented a slightly different plot for her here (the love plot with Hazem) based on our research and our desire to write a more rounded character. Adnan the security guard is almost entirely our invention, and he replaces a very different, untranslatable character in the Erdman. Vaish's character the student doesn't appear at all in Erdman's play – she is a collaboration between Vaish and myself, and her big speech in Act 4 is based on quotations from real students in various camps in the Middle East and North Africa. Similarly Sami's big Act 5 speech is based on dozens of different verbatim sources mixed with Erdman's original. Hazem's terrific Act 3 speech was written by him based on Erdman's original, and reworked in rehearsals. The camp announcements are our invention. The omnipresence of toilets in the play is entirely a strange and spontaneous product of our own research and process (World Toilet Day is real – 19 November). I have to say a special thanks to Vaish and Charlie who both dug me out of ruts at various points in the writing process. Thanks Vaish and Charlie! Also thanks to Tessa Leong who did great work for us in the research phase.

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We wanted the show to be something of an act of solidarity, so we've been deliberately frugal. The idea was to make a show that could be picked up and carried away and put down and set up again in any available space – a bit like the life of a refugee family. Almost the entire set has been scavenged from what's around in the building here.

—

Comedy is a technique that allows us to acknowledge things that we're otherwise too embarrassed to acknowledge. Because we're so embarrassed in Australia by the existence of refugees we always need them to be demons or saints – murderous terrorists or piteous supplicants. This play is an attempt instead to lend this group of people the same privileges of silliness, joy, pettiness and ridiculousness that we get to enjoy. (I've seen people behave like Sami in the box office queue at Belvoir.) We all have a minimum amount of dignity, and when it runs low we get desperate and ridiculous. It can be appalling to watch and it can be funny to watch, but it also lays bare a fundamental political question: how much can we take from people in the name of policy or economic growth? Who the hell do we think we are?



Eamon Flack

# ABOUT NIKOLAI ERDMAN

Nikolai Erdman had a remarkable impact on Russian theatre, despite writing only two full-length plays, of which one was banned before it even made it to the stage.

Critics and contemporaries agree that Nikolai Erdman is one of the greatest Russian playwrights since Chekhov, and his two plays are regarded as classics of 20th-century comedy.

Erdman was born in Moscow on 16 November 1900, the son of a Baltic-German father and a Russian mother. Before he was even 20, the young writer had witnessed failed uprisings against the corrupt and backward administration of Tsar Nicholas II, Russia's disastrous experience in the First World War, the Tsar's abdication, the Bolshevik Revolution, civil war, and the consolidation of a communist government. This social and political turmoil fuelled Erdman's passion for writing, particularly comedy and satire.

As a teenager, Erdman was an avid poet, drawing inspiration from Vladimir Mayakovsky's satirical works. Erdman made his literary debut in 1919, publishing a few well-crafted poems. He became a member of a group of like-minded poets who called themselves the Imaginists, led by famed provocateur Sergei Yesenin. At just 19, he was drafted into the Red Army where he served as a scribe. When the poet returned home, he found a very different Moscow. Tsarist repression was over and Stalin's tyranny was yet to come – and Russia was entering the extraordinary period of the New Economic Policy (NEP).

Due to the commercial freedoms permitted by the NEP, a host of small theatres began to crop up in Moscow. There was suddenly a demand for dramatic texts, particularly satirical parody, and Erdman seized the opportunity to demonstrate his comedic flair. His first major success came when he was asked to co-author a revue for the newly-founded Moscow Academic Theatre of Satire. *Moscow from a Point of View* premiered in October 1924 and quickly became one of the hottest tickets in the city. Soon, the young writer came to the attention of the great theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold. When he heard that Erdman had been putting the finishing touches on his first full-length play, Meyerhold secured the rights to it and *The Mandate* premiered in the director's new theatre in 1925.

The play was an immediate success and Erdman became the talk of the town. Set in Moscow during the early days of Stalin, *The Mandate* (also known as *The Warrant*) attacks the sinister loss of individual identity in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, but does so with hilarity. It was praised by Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Commissar for Culture, as “the first truly Soviet play” and Erdman was compared to every great Russian playwright or comic writer of the past including Gogol, Sukhovo-Kobylin and Chekhov. Pavel Markov, one of Russia's finest theatre critics and scholars of the 20th century, called *The Mandate* “the beginning of a new theatre”.

Along with stellar reviews, *The Mandate* also proved one of Meyerhold's biggest box office hits. The production took less than one year to reach its 100th performance, which was unheard of at the time and the director was unsurprisingly keen to commission another play from Erdman. Meyerhold had some competition with the celebrated director Konstantin Stanislavsky also vying to direct Erdman's next work. However, bigger challenges would emerge.

When Erdman completed his second play in 1928, the atmosphere in the country had changed dramatically. Joseph Stalin seized power and the NEP was dissolved, with social and economic life in Russia shifting towards totalitarian control. It was in this context that Erdman delivered *The Suicide*, a comic drama about a man whose declaration to kill himself is hijacked by those around him. With its assertion of individual power, the subversive work ended up being Erdman's own tragic artistic suicide note of sorts.

*The Suicide* was first banned by the censor on 25 September 1930 following initial readings in early April. However, support for the play endured and Stanislavsky wrote to Stalin in an effort to overturn the decision. Stalin eventually agreed, but noted that some of his “closest comrades consider it empty and even harmful”.



Stanislavsky took the hint and abandoned rehearsals, but Meyerhold's theatre seized the challenge and rehearsed the play throughout the summer of 1932. At a dress rehearsal to a closed audience of high-placed officials, Lazar Kaganovich, one of Stalin's right-hand men, nonchalantly told Meyerhold afterwards that "there's no need to work on this play". Production ceased and *The Mandate*, which had been playing to packed houses, was also closed down.

A year later on 10 October 1933, Erdman was arrested along with Vladimir Mass, his frequent writing partner. The official explanation was that they had written a series of anti-Soviet fables, but it's clear that the real culprit was *The Suicide*. Erdman was sentenced to three years' exile in Siberia, and a further ten years' banishment from the capital. Some have reflected that Erdman was fortunate to be exiled so early, before Stalin's truly brutal repressions really got underway. Tragically, Meyerhold, perhaps Erdman's greatest champion, was executed in 1941 as a "foreign spy".

Following his sentence, Erdman was not permitted to reside in Moscow or associate with his former circle of artistic comrades, but he did not stop writing. While he never wrote another stage play, Erdman turned his talents to screenwriting, penning some of Russia's most popular features and animated films from the 1930s to the 1960s.

*The Suicide* had to wait 40 years to be performed, but it finally premiered in Sweden in 1969. Erdman reportedly sat up all night next to the phone anxiously awaiting the reviews. They were terrific. The play was subsequently staged throughout the 1970s and 1980s by a staggering number of theatres around the world, and was finally performed in the Soviet Union in 1982. Sadly, Erdman never witnessed this homecoming; the great playwright died on 10 August 1970.

#### References

- D. Donnellan, 'Dangerously Funny', *The Guardian*, 2004  
J. Freedman, *The Major Plays of Nikolai Erdman*, Russian Theatre Archive, 1995  
G. Raby & A. MacAlpine, *The Suicide: A Study Guide*, Brock University, 2012



Nikolai Erdman

# REHEARSING SAMI IN PARADISE



Fayssal Bazzi and Marta Kaczmarek

Describe what you see in the picture above.

What might the relationship between these two characters be?

What do you think is happening in this moment?



Fayssal Bazzi, Mandela Mathia, Charlie Garber, Hazem Shammass and Nancy Denis.

Describe what is happening in the moment above.

Who is the focus of this moment in the scene and why?

How do the actors' body language and facial expressions convey this?



Hazem Shammass, Fayssal Bazzi, Yalin Ozucelik, Nancy Denis, Arky Michael and Vaishnavi Suryaprakash

Describe what you see in the picture above.

What do you think is happening in this moment?

What do you think the relationship is between these characters? Why?



Paula Arundell and Yalin Ozucelik.

Describe what you see in the picture above.

What do you think might be happening in this moment? Where might this scene be set?

Who do you think has the higher status in the image? Why?



# PRODUCTION ELEMENTS

The elements of production are the technical and visual elements used to manipulate the elements of drama in order to effectively tell a play's story.

In these notes we are going to look at *Sami in Paradise*

Live Foley

Set Model Box

## LIVE FOLEY

Foley, a term named after Universal Studios sound effect pioneer Jack Foley, is when sound effects are made with different objects to imitate the sounds of real, everyday life. The reproduced sounds can be anything from the swishing of clothing and footsteps to squeaky doors and smashing glass, and composers normally use it to create a sense of reality in the scene. Foley is most often used for film and other media because without it, movies and films would feel unnaturally quiet and uncomfortable.

*Sami in Paradise* uses the Live Foley effect, creating sounds and background noises to add to the production's tension, atmosphere and feeling of reality. In the play however, nearly all of the Foley effects that are used play a visual role too, as we get to see them being made on stage. In one moment, a character called Maria takes a bath behind a curtain. On the side of the stage another character, Arky, holding a microphone in a bucket full of water, splashes his hands around to create the sounds to accompany Maria's bath. This moment helps the audience better understand and visualize the moment as, even though we don't get to see Maria, we hear the bath sounds.

A slightly different example is how throughout the play the Assistant Director/Owke, played by Mandela Mathia, often sits at a mock-production desk as he pretends to cue sounds and makes announcements over the microphone. In one moment, we see him press a button at the exact moment a "boing" sound is played, suggesting to the audience that he was the one who cued it.

Below is a link to a video on some examples of how Foley is used in film

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNvKhe2npMM>.

### Questions to consider after seeing this production

1. Why do you think the director has chosen to use live Foley in a way that is both visual and auditory?
2. What is the impact of seeing these elements of creation and moments of theatricality on stage?



# SET DESIGN

Before a set is made for a production a set designer creates a design for a model box built to the scale of the theatre. Usually this model box is exactly 25 times smaller than the real size of the theatre (1:25 scale). The purpose of this step in the design process is to give the creative and production team a chance to review the design before it is constructed. The model box provides specific information about texture, materials, look and detail of a set.

## Questions to consider after seeing this production

1. What are the key differences between the early set model box design pictured above and the final set design you saw during the show?
2. Why might these changes have taken place? Do you think it was more effective this way?
3. What was the effect of the stage being crowded with props?
4. What was the effect of using the curtain as the "backstage" area?



Set Model Box by Dale Ferguson (2018)



Set Model Box by Dale Ferguson (2018)



Set Model Box by Dale Ferguson (2018)



# POST SHOW DISCUSSION

Discuss the use of comedy throughout the play. Why do you think it was used and what do you think the effect of it was? How was comedy used to heighten and/or relieve tension in different moments?



*Sami in Paradise* is a play-within-a-play. What was the effect of breaking the fourth wall for the audience and having roles such as the Director and Assistant Director?



Describe the actors use of movement in the production. How did this support the narrative and the style of the play?



The actors remain on stage for the duration of the play. What is the effect of having them on stage the whole time? How does this help to establish and maintain the atmosphere of the piece?

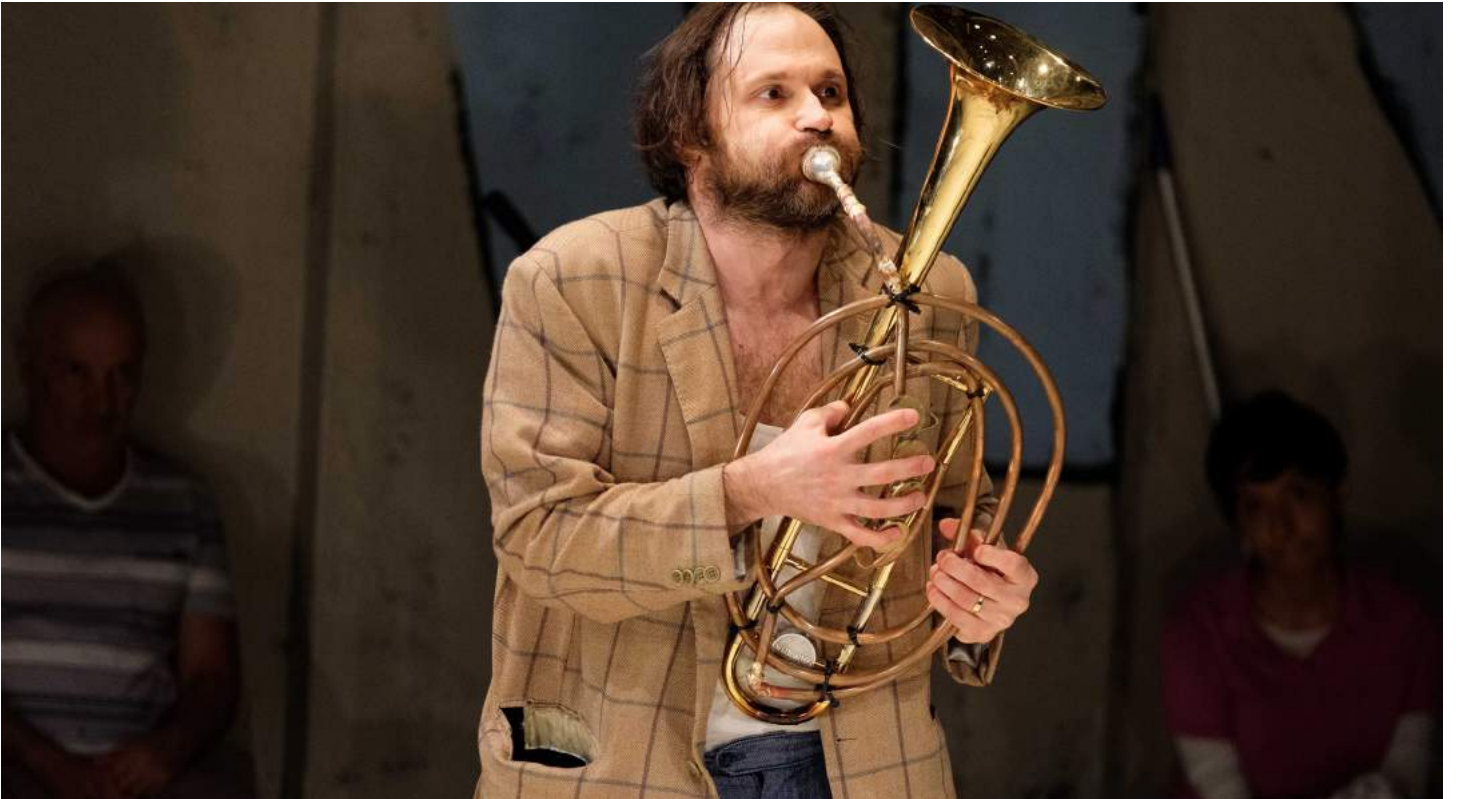




Many of the actors play multiple characters. What performance skills and techniques do the actors use to create these distinct characters?



Many props held symbolic meanings. Identify some of these props and discuss what they represented in terms of the meanings and themes of the play.



*Sami in Paradise* deals with themes that are just as confronting now as they were when Nikolai Erdman wrote *The Suicide* in 1928. What are some of these themes and how are they explored in this production?



*The Suicide* was first banned by the censor in Russia 1930 and in 1933 Erdman was arrested and consequently exiled for writing anti-Soviet content. What themes/issues do you think would have been controversial at the time? Are these same themes controversial in contemporary Australian context?





# PODCAST



Step backstage with director Eamon Flack, assistant director Carissa Licciardello and actors Fayssal Bazzi, Charlie Garber and Vaishnavi Suryaprakash as they discuss this mad-cap celebration of life.

Produced by Zoe Ferguson for Belvoir

Listen to the *Sami in Paradise* podcast online here:

<https://omny.fm/shows/belvoir/sami-in-paradise-backstage>

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