

THEATRE

السيرة الهلالية

THE BANŪ HILĀL EPIC

BASHAR MURKUS &
KHULOOD BASEL/
KHASHABI THEATRE



FREE
REPUBLIC OF
VIENNA
FESTIVAL

25 – 27 May
Theater Akzent

Khashabi Theatre is all about strong imagery and sensuous theatre. Their most recent play is based on the Arab Banū Hilāl Epic. Passed down by oral storytelling, it tells the tale of eleventh century Abu Zayd al-Hilali, who started out as a refugee child and became the most legendary Arab leader. Some say it takes up to 150 hours to recount the entire epic; it was placed on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage of humanity in 2008. The Palestinian, Haifa-based Khashabi Theatre uses breathtaking images to approach the Arab epic from a haunting contemporary perspective. Like their earlier works, this production is the result of extensive research and collaboration with artists from a range of disciplines: theatre being reinvented as performance brimming with music and lyricism! Theatre-makers Bashar Murkus and Khulood Basel place celebration at centre stage, celebrating the power of creating worlds by narration together with the audience.

Language
Arabic

Surtitles
German, English

Duration
3 hrs, including
1 intermission


barrier-free access

Q&A
26 May, following
the performance

Workshop
27 May
*From the Question to the
Theatrical Event*
Workshop with
Bashar Murkus and
Khulood Basel

What keeps epics alive is
that they can be read in
different ways time and again.
They are not limited to a
single interpretation.

Text, Concept, Direction Bashar Murkus **With** Abed Zuabi, Adan Rabos, Atallah Tannous, Maisan Miso Samara, Maya Omayya Keesh, Rana Barasni **Scenography** Majdala Khoury **Dramaturgy** Khulood Basel **Composition** Habib Hanna **Live music** Rami Nakhleh **Music production, Arrangements** Khalil EPI **Light design, Technical direction** Muaz Al Jubeih **Sound** Moody Kablawi **Puppets maker** Vita Hleihil **Dabke Dance Segment Choreography** Samaa Wakim **Assistance design, Stage management** Nancy Mkaabal **Production, Tour management, Surtitles** Samera Kadry **Translation surtitles** Luna Al-Mousli (German), Alice Yousef (English)

Production Khulood Basel – Khashabi Theatre **Coproduction** DESINGEL – CARTA Festival, Edinburgh International Festival, Cité internationale de la langue française, Théâtre des 13 vents, Espoon Theatre, Teatre Nacional de Catalunya **International distribution** La Magnanerie executed by the team of the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Free Republic of Vienna
World Premiere January 2026, DESINGEL(Antwerp)

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE BANI HILAL EPIC

Welcome, dear guests! The Bani Hilal epic is the legend of the Hilali tribe: a tale that, according to popular poets and story-tellers, takes over one hundred and fifty hours to tell in full.

It is traditionally performed at weddings, during celebrations and long, convivial evenings; such events can last up to ninety nights. This is a story that the audience wants to hear time and again, its attraction lying not only in the plot but also in the way it is told: the detailed descriptions, the improvisation, the communal atmosphere that is created, the way it sets off the imagination.

Tonight, we are showing you a new, three-hour version in Arabic, interwoven with music, poetry, song, movement, puppetry and visual design.

The performance has surtitles and brief summaries of the events will be provided at various points throughout the evening. It is therefore up to you whether you want to read the surtitles to follow the full text or whether you want to abandon yourself to the plot, the images and the atmosphere on stage – you will not lose track of the story.

Below is a guide to the journey that outlines the crucial parts of this epic poem.

FIRST PART OF THE TALE

The story begins with warrior Rizeq, son of Nayel, lamenting that he has grown old without an heir. He climbs a tall mountain, where he is called on to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca. There, he will find a wife.

Several years later, Rizeq marries Khadra, but they only have a daughter. When Khadra's grief grows ever greater, the women of the tribe perform a wishing ritual by the bird pond. The women watch the birds who come to drink there and wish for children who look like the birds. Khadra chooses a black bird.

One morning several months later, the heroes of the new generation are born. Each of them has the characteristics of the bird his mother had watched as she made her wish. Among them is Salameh, the son of Khadra and Rizeq. He will later become known as Abu Zaid. In this performance we call him either Salameh or Abu Zaid; that is the same person. In contrast to his parents, he has dark skin. Two others are born at the same time as him: his friend Abu al-Qumsan and Abu Zaid's mare Hamra. They will accompany him throughout his life.

It is also the birthday of Hasan, the son of King Sarhan; he will be the leader of the Bani Hilal tribe after his father's death. Another who is born on that day is Diab, son of Ghanem, a warrior who will shape the future of the tribe.

Khadra is accused of betrayal and banished by Rizeq because of her son's skin colour. She reaches the kingdom of Prince Fadel, the ruler of Bani Zahlan, who honourably takes her in and adopts Abu Zaid. Abu Zaid grows up believing that he is Prince Fadel's own son. Prince Fadel favours Abu Zaid over all others, because he had a dream in which Abu Zaid saves the tribe in the future. However, the people grow resentful about such preferential treatment, so that Salameh grows up as an outsider. The insults make him an aggressive warrior. First, he kills his teacher for having called him a refugee and later he kills another student.

These events trigger a series of acts of revenge, springing over to the relatives of the boy from the Bani Aqil tribe who was killed. The conflict starts as Atwan al-Aqili, one of the tribe's warriors, sets out on a revenge campaign. However, Abu Zaid is victorious. The war between the tribes escalates into a permanent conflict, in which Abu Zaid has the upper hand until his enemies seek help from the tribe of the Bani Hilal – Abu Zaid's own tribe – without knowing that Abu Zaid is one of them.

Abu Zaid fights against the Bani Hilal and triumphs. He grants them a truce on his conditions. In response, King

Sarhan sends Diab to ask the famous warrior Rizeq – Abu Zaid's father – for help. Rizeq had disappeared from the tribe and has been living alone in the mountains since having banished his wife Khadra and his son.

Rizeq returns as a grieving old man in order to defend his people only to face a young warrior, unaware that it is his son. His son, in turn, does not know that the opponent he is facing is his father. In one of the fiercest battles of the epic poem, which we are told in great detail, the father finds his son.

This part of the epic ends with a revelation that is long overdue: father and son reconcile, Khadra's honour is reinstated and Abu Zaid returns to his tribe, the Bani Hilal, from where he was once banished for his skin colour, as a hero and one of his people's leaders.

SECOND PART OF THE TALE

The cycle of revenge does not stop when Abu Zaid returns to his people. It keeps going for years and takes the lives of many heroes of the older generation. Among them is Rizeq, Abu Zaid's father. Abu Zaid becomes the tribe's military leader after his death. Then King Sarhan dies and leaves the throne to his son Hasan. At the same time, Diab, son of Ghanem, remains without rank and title, so that his heart becomes filled with ever more hatred in this part of the epic poem.

During a ceasefire, Abu Zaid is bored and sets out on a hunting expedition with his companion Abu al-Qumsan.

They come across a desperate woman whose son was abducted. She has to pay a high 'ransom' in order to get him back: the horse of Jaber al-Aqili, the leader of the enemy tribe Bani Aqil.

Abu Zaid accepts the challenge and sets out on a dangerous adventure to steal the horse. What starts as a bold theft becomes a fateful encounter centring around Aliya, the daughter of his enemy Jaber al-Aqili. Both end up in great danger together.

An unexpected love story develops between them and casts a shimmer of hope that breaks through the year-long cycle of revenge. However, the story takes another turn. The Bani Hilal tribe is afflicted by a drought and King Hasan orders Abu Zaid to go seek out a new territory. He sets out towards the West together with three warriors, including the King's son Mar'i. They reach Tunisia, but the news of their quest for a new land and their intentions to conquer the territory has preceded them. The King of Tunisia, Zinati Khalifa, finds out about their plans and orders their arrest. They are caught and sentenced to death.

While Abu Zaid and his companions, including Mar'i, are still travelling, Sa'da, the daughter of Zinati Khalifa, the King of Tunisia, is seeking to find the love of her life. Her servant tells her about Mar'i's beauty and his noble character, and thus Sa'da falls in love with him without ever having seen him. When Mar'i, Abu Zaid and the others arrive in Tunisia and Zinati Khalifa sentences them to death, Sa'da intervenes to save her love. She betrays her father and convinces him to

release Abu Zaid, claiming that he will return with a ransom and many riches while she knows that he will return with an army.

Abu Zaid returns to his tribe and starts a large campaign. Leading the Bani Hilal, he marches across territories and borders towards Tunisia in order to free the captives and conquer the country. However, upon their arrival their own tribe is marked by its wars. Their divisions run deep – especially between King Hasan and Diab. The Bani Hilal are able to conquer Tunisia, especially thanks to Diab, who kills Zinati Khalifa by thrusting his lance between his eyes. Driven by ambition and jealousy, Diab claims the throne of Tunisia for himself. He also desires Sa'da, the love of Mar'i, son of King Hasan, and daughter of the murdered King of Tunisia. When she rejects him, he kills first her and then King Hasan. Even Abu Zaid is no longer safe from him.

Enjoy the performance!

IT'S ABOUT BEING TOGETHER

INTERVIEW WITH BASHAR MURKUS

How did you first encounter the Banū Hilāl Epic – were you brought up with it or did it come to you later?

When I was a child, my grandmother would always talk about the main character, Abu Zayd al-Hilali. She told parts of the epic and used him as a metaphor for someone good and powerful. That was my first connection. It's something very special to me. I remembered that in recent years, as I was wondering how to find my own voice in theatre. The whole epic, however, I discovered during my research: the entire story, the political dimension. It should be famous, but it's not. When I think about that in the context of the whole world: imagine you have an Iliad and nobody knows it. I believe that my generation, they don't know the story. The youngest people, they really don't know anything about it. And this fact drove me crazy because I am sure from reading researchers talking about it that once, before the Nakba, it was a part of people's life and memory. After, it simply fell away. But it's not only this epic, it's the whole connection to the Arab culture and world. Palestinian people today are living in the middle of the Arab world, but because of the occupation we have been disconnected from our real roots in the region for many

years. Only in the last ten or fifteen years have we started to connect those dots – because of the revolutions in the area, the wars, people from Syria going to Europe, the internet.

Why did you decide to put this epic on stage? Why now?

To be honest, I wasn't interested in the epic at first. I started from a very personal question: Why am I using only European methods and techniques to create theatre? Why don't we use the Arabic tools, the Arabic ways – which, when you study them, when you look at them from a modern point of view, are palpably relevant and interesting. I believe that almost all of us artists, however, at least in Palestine, feel that they are primitive. And this feeling has something to do with the colonisation of the whole area. It made me very angry as an artist. I thought I should do something with that. If I want to continue as an artist who is aiming to talk with audiences all over the world, I should find a way to suggest something that only I can bring. So my research started from this question. And then I came across this epic again, which surprised me: the amount of beauty and heritage it holds. That made me say: OK, if you are

going to do this research for a few years this epic should be the first step. At the same time, I discovered in the research that there is something there in how I understand the Arabic way of doing performing arts: about celebration. That you are celebrating the story, even if it's a sad story. Understanding that this moment of people coming to watch you is a celebration about something. So I felt that especially in this dark time in our history as the Palestinian people, it's the right time to suggest a celebration. I feel that there is something very political about that – about saying we can also bring this to stages all over the world.

How do you connect to the Arabic storytelling tradition – and what do you add to it today?

In the process, at the beginning I was trying to understand the whole epic in a dramaturgical way: is it three acts, is it five acts? And then I said OK, maybe it's none of those. I discovered that there is a different structure. I describe it like addressing a problem and then very quickly finding a solution, but that solution creates a bigger problem. I still don't have the words to describe exactly what I'm doing, but I'm feeling it. I trust my DNA of things – honestly, it's a very nice feeling. This is the first time in my whole career that I am OK with giving the audience a full synopsis. Normally I think: no, it will kill the suspense. But then I understood that this work is about something else. It's not about the story. You can know the story. It's about being together.

The original epic is said to take up to 150 hours to perform. How do you even begin to approach something so vast?

There are two main versions of what we still have today. The Syrian and the Egyptian one. The Egyptian part I could only find in old recordings from the radio. There is a great researcher called Abdu Rahman Al-Abnudi. He did an amazing project, inviting one of the oldest poets from Upper Egypt to record the whole epic. I needed to listen to all of that. Eventually, I discovered another poet from Upper Egypt who tells the epic in a different way. I understood that everyone will tell it differently. If everyone tells this story differently, what connects them? That is what I tried to discover and what I put into the work itself. It will take a different guise in each country. That's why we chose to take a Palestinian point of view on the epic.

Do you read the epos as a political metaphor for today?

I think trying to make it into a metaphor will kill its complexity. What keeps epics still alive is that you can continue reading them in different ways. They are not locked into one single interpretation.

Who accompanied you during this process? Who were your collaborators?

What we do at Khashabi is that we invite artistic collaborators to be part of the whole creative process in each project, because we love to understand each project as a full journey. We spent two years working on this piece.

Khulood Basel is finding great ways to produce this massive work in Palestine and also collaborates as a dramaturge. The second very important name is the composer Habib Hanna. The epic itself has different forms of being sung. There is the Egyptian way, which we can know because it was recorded. But when we took the decision to create a Palestinian version, I wanted to establish a dialogue with Palestinian folklore structures of music and put the epic inside that musical approach. I needed an expert for that, someone who knows this tradition. Habib Hanna is a specialist in Arabic music and especially in Palestinian folklore. He did great work in this dialogue with folklore – sometimes using it as it is and sometimes writing new things that feel very real. We took one more decision: we wanted to create this work with a new generation of actors. Because when you think about old epics, the first idea is to work with the real storytellers from Palestine, old people who carry the heritage. But we wanted a new generation who can bring a different energy and help us shape our questions about this epic. We chose a Tunisian music producer, Khalil Epi, whose work had always been to transform Tunisian folklore into electronic music. He entered our team to work with Habib in transforming parts of the traditional music into electronic music, which added a very interesting layer to the work.

Your work is visually very strong. How did you transform something that is meant to be heard into something that is so powerful to be watched?

I have a full book of sketches. We were wondering how we can put an image on stage that is powerful, that activates the imagination without cancelling it. Nobody knows what Abu Zayd al-Hilali looked like. That's something about the Arabic way of understanding characters – characters only appear in the public imagination.

You work independently. What does that mean in practice?

We had a very beautiful physical space in Haifa for ten years, which was a very important part of the Palestinian artistic and cultural scene in the city. Sadly, we lost it. We Palestinians are losing something that we love almost every day. But we find our ways: the right allies, the right co-producers, the right support from people and from organisations and from art and cultural makers in the whole world. This is how we do it year by year.

BIOGRAPHIES

Bashar Murkus, a Palestinian playwright and director, was born in 1992 in Kafr Yasif and lives in Haifa. He is a co-founder of the independent Khashabi Theatre and has been its Artistic Director since 2015. His work has been presented internationally in cities including Brussels, Paris, Berlin, Tunis and New York. In 2014, Murkus sparked a political controversy with his production *The Parallel Time* at the Al-Midan Theatre, which led to significant cuts in theatre funding and became a symbol of the struggle of independent Palestinian art against censorship. His work combines physicality, music, visual imagery and oral traditions.

Khulood Basel is a Palestinian creative producer, dramaturge and visual artist, born in Moscow in 1987. Working at the intersection of theatre, visual art and interdisciplinary performance, her projects explore memory, identity and political reality. Basel is closely connected to the independent Palestinian cultural scene and develops productions that bring together international collaboration with local narratives. As a dramaturge and producer, she supports experimental theatre projects and fosters artistic spaces beyond institutional structures. Her work is characterised by visual precision, collective processes and social reflection. Co-Founder and Khashabi's CEO for the past decade, she spearheaded cultural production and community organizing as a vital mode of political activism, resistance to silencing of Palestinian identity, and a hub for capacity-building by initiating and developing the Khashabi production mode.

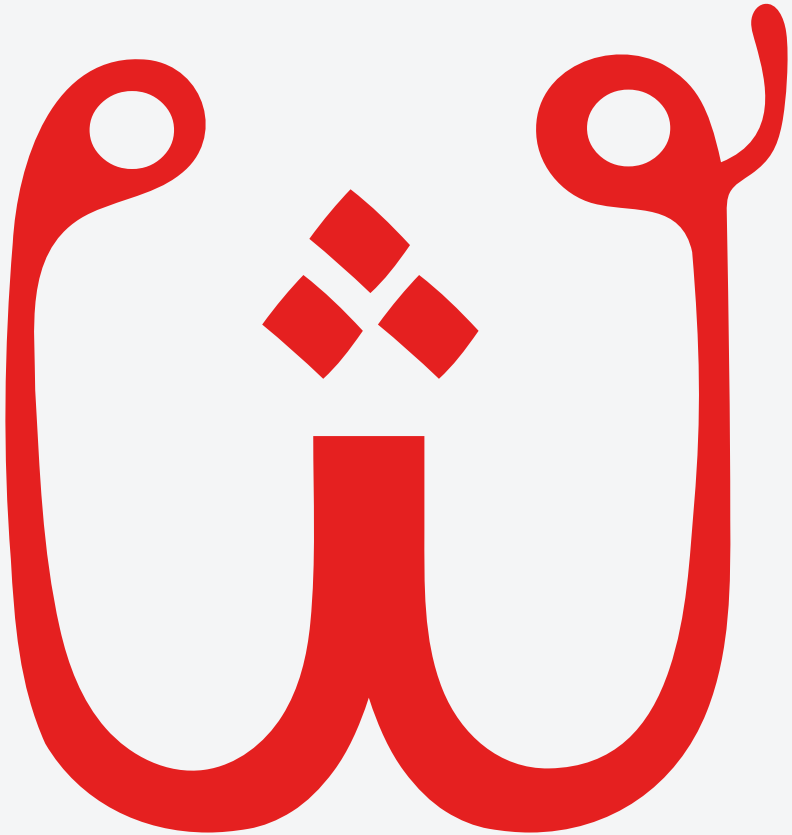
Khashabi Theatre is an independent Palestinian theatre in Haifa, founded by a group of young artists including Bashar Murkus and Khulood Basel. It sees itself as an open space for experimental theatre, music and performance beyond state control. Khashabi combines political urgency with striking aesthetics and has become an important symbol of cultural independence and artistic resistance.

PUBLICATION DETAILS

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