

LITTLE SYRIA. By Omar Offendum, with Ronnie Malley and Thanks Joey. Old Town School of Folk Music, Chicago. May 12, 2023.



Image 1: Publicity poster for Little Syria by Omar Offendum, with Ronnie Malley and Thanks Joey. Photo Credit: Ridwan Adhami. Courtesy of Omar Offendum, Ronnie Malley, and Thanks Joey.

As soon as you walk into the Old Town School of Folk Music you are hit with a whiff of nostalgia from the bazaar-style tables selling specialty items. In Syrian dialect, these street vendor tables are known as *basta*, and the one that attracts the most attention is placed strategically next to the hallway entrance leading into the theatre; it offers specialty Syrian soap from Aleppo and *basboosa*, a semolina-based dessert common in the SWANA region. After

passing along the tables, audience members enter a proscenium-style theatre with a traditional Syrian furniture set, including an ornate mirror, inlaid with mother of pearl.

The show begins with the three musicians entering the stage. Omar Offendum greets the audience, specifically calling on the “Shami people,” meaning the people from Damascus, and then the Palestinians in the house. He begins to recount to the audience a story, in the style of a *hakawati*, a hired storyteller common in Syrian coffee houses, dressed typically in a fez and a traditional robe. Offendum embodies the *hakawati* spirit—not surprising from an artist who identifies himself as a poet & lyricist—but adds his own contemporary touch to this persona with his love for Hip-Hop and his experience growing up in the diaspora. He is also not shy about wearing the imperialist Ottoman fez, or *tarboosh*—a questionable choice by today’s standards that strive towards historic justice and decolonization, but admittedly inseparable from Syrian identity and collective nostalgia.



Image 2: Omar Offendum, publicity photo from the NYC performance of Little Syria by Omar Offendum, with Ronnie Malley and Thanks Joey. Photo Credit: Ridwan Adhami. Courtesy of Omar Offendum, Ronnie Malley, and Thanks Joey.



Image 3: Omar Offendum in the NYC performance of Little Syria by Omar Offendum, with Ronnie Malley and Thanks Joey. Photo Credit: Ridwan Adhami. Courtesy of Omar Offendum, Ronnie Malley, and Thanks Joey.

Smoothly and in a timely manner, musician Ronny Malley, DJ Thanks Joey, and Offendum turn the words of the story Offendum is reciting into a song. Malley plays multiple instruments including *oud* and piano, while Thanks Joey lays down beats, and occasionally, they sing backup or harmonize with Offendum. The focus of this show is Syrian-American identity and history, starting from the neighborhood of Little Syria, which existed in Lower Manhattan from the late 1880s to the 1940s. The show proceeds from singing about Syrian soap, to celebrating Syrian food, to boasting about the savvy entrepreneurial mindset that Syrians are known for. The lyrics include bilingual plays on words, and the musicians encourage the audience to participate by clapping along, repeating phrases, or doing a call and response with Offendum.

The performance is full of messages about Syrian representation, Syrian excellence, and diasporic culture, incorporating carefully researched stories from Syrian-American archival history. Unfortunately, and not surprisingly, this history is male dominated; this, however, does

not diminish the years of effort that Offendum, Malley and Joey invested in anthropological and ethnographic research as they traveled around the US, with the support of residencies, to collect and document the materials needed to create this show.



Image 4: The NYC performance of *Little Syria* by Omar Offendum, with Ronnie Malley and Thanks Joey. Photo Credit: Ridwan Adhami. Courtesy of Omar Offendum, Ronnie Malley, and Thanks Joey.



Image 5: (RTL) Thanks Joey, Omar Offendum, and Ronnie Malley in Little Syria. Photo Credit: Ridwan Adhami. Courtesy of Omar Offendum, Ronnie Malley, and Thanks Joey.

The three performers do not hold back as they disparage white cultural ignorance and privilege as well as capitalism, and they use humor to belittle the powers of America's imperialism in the face of diasporic Arab cultural identity. Yet grief is subtly present throughout the show—grief at the fact that Little Syria no longer exists, since it was razed to create the Brooklyn-Battery tunnel; grief in the songs about Offendum's late father and our ancestors; and grief in the knowledge we hold in our bodies of what has become of Syria in the last decade. This grief is

also visually evident from the black fez Offendum begins the show with, later changing to the more traditional red one. Regardless of political affiliations, ethnicity, or religious sect, it is no secret that Syrians hold tons of grief, including the second and third generation children of immigrants who inherit it or are surrounded by it. Grief and nostalgia have become almost an integral core of what it means to be Syrian, yet at the same time Syrians take great pride in their ability to persist, endure and make something out of nothing. This is truly celebrated and signified in *Little Syria*. One song even directly acknowledges that our region has historically witnessed countless wars and invasions—and as Offendum says, those have shaped us but will never break us.

Aesthetically the production is overwhelmingly rich, with interdisciplinary elements from stories, bilingual rap lyrics, historical references, a traditional furniture set, multiple instruments, and Thanks Joey's beats. Perhaps the strongest visual elements are the projections that complement every song. These projections contain a collage of videos and historical photos, often overlaid with cartoons and graphics, which change quickly and rhythmically, coherent with the fast-paced lyricism of most of the show's songs. At times they reference a research document or relevant historical figures; at other times they emphasize the meaning of a song through symbols, words, or the text of certain verses from Arabic literary poems. Through this aesthetic combination, *Little Syria* creates a complex web of diasporic references expressed in a contemporary style. Its expressive power lies in its complexity because it provides countless threads of connections that every single audience member, regardless of their background or generation, can cling to.



Image 6: Props from Little Syria by Omar Offendum, with Ronnie Malley and Thanks Joey.

Photo Credit: Ridwan Adhami. Courtesy of Omar Offendum, Ronnie Malley, and Thanks Joey.



Image 7: Omar Offendum in the NYC performance of Little Syria, directed by Omar Offendum, with Ronnie Malley and Thanks Joey. Photo Credit: Ridwan Adhami. Courtesy of Omar Offendum, Ronnie Malley, and Thanks Joey.

Little Syria is by no means little; on the contrary, it is big, diverse, and most importantly, it does not shy away from performing stories and songs that represent the mosaic of *Bilad Al-Sham*, the Levant region. The topics are broad, culminating in a lengthy event that leaves you with much to

appreciate. From songs that represent Muslim faith to songs about money, from a song about *arak* (a strong alcoholic drink common in the Levant) to the story-song of an infamous immigrant named Big Mike whom everyone in Little Syria feared, every part gives us a new glimpse into diasporic history.

Syrian identity has become an amalgamation of nostalgia and grief, and we Syrians most embody these emotions when speaking Arabic during our most vulnerable and celebratory moments. The acknowledgment of this, and the emphasis on shared blood and spirit throughout the piece, is presented with a royal *Basha* (“kingly”) swagger. Overall, the performance experience is empowering and inspires belief in oneself, a familiar concept to the Arab and Sufi poets who are a constant source of inspiration for Omar Offendum’s work. The poem *Conference of the Birds* by Farid ud-Din Attar specifically resonates here, with the mythical Simorgh bird being the symbolic representation of the divine beauty within oneself—the “I” that is one with the divine. Perhaps the best conclusion that can be drawn from *Little Syria* is that no matter how far away we go in search of a better life, there is a divine spirit reminiscent of the divine Simorgh bird within us, inseparable from the mythical place we come from, *Bilad Al-Sham*.



Image 8: Omar Offendum in the NYC performance of Little Syria, directed by Omar Offendum, with Ronnie Malley and Thanks Joey. Photo Credit: Ridwan Adhami. Courtesy of Omar Offendum, Ronnie Malley, and Thanks Joey.

Reviewed by Sami Ismat, Columbia College Chicago

Sami Ismat is a Research Practitioner in Theatre & Performance, from Damascus, Syria. He serves as an adjunct professor at several universities in Chicago. As a practicing artist he has directed, written, performed, produced, and consulted on numerous projects at various cultural institutions in the US. His work & research explores how the intersectionality of performance can present/represent memory, trauma, and the collective cultural consciousness of diasporic identities. He draws on practices stemming from contemporary performance art, devised & physical theatre, documentary practices, ethnographic research, and choreography. Sami's latest publication was a chapter in *Deconstructing the Myths of Islamic Art* titled "Deconstructing Myths via Performance Strategies."