



BADASS THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS

# INVASION!

Written By

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*Who is Abulkasem?*



PHOTO: MARCEL J. VERHEIJ

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# THE STUDY GUIDE!

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Dear Teachers,

**On behalf of Badass Theatre Co. I would like to thank you in advance for bringing/encouraging your students to see our inaugural production, Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s *Invasion!* I hope that you find it as engaging, entertaining, and thought-provoking as we do. Speaking personally, having been a Dramaturge in training and professionally for nigh-on a decade now, I have never been as excited to work on a play as I have been to work on *Invasion!*, and I know that many of your students will share my enthusiasm after having seen it. The purpose of this Study Guide is two-fold: First, is provide a little bit of context in which to understand the play and the theatrical experience. To that end the guide includes a preparatory essay on some of the deeper structural elements and themes of the play, as well and familiarizing you and your students with the playwright’s background and previous body of work. Next this study guide is meant to help facilitate classroom discussions after the play. Included in this section are an outline of the play, a glossary of names and terms from the program, and six study/discussion questions that try and get at the main topics dealt with in *Invasion!*. Lastly is a brief list of ancillary readings that might be of interest for further study. I hope you find this guide helpful and informative. Please feel free to leave any comments on our company’s website at [www.badasstheatre.org](http://www.badasstheatre.org). Thank you and hope to see you at the theatre.**

**Ian Goodrich,  
Badass Theatre Co. Dramaturge and Core Associate.**

## The Badass Manifesto

Theatre. It’s been around for as long as human beings have been human beings. For as long as there’s been one person here to tell a story and one person over there to listen, some form of theatre has existed. And as long as that single circumstance remains true, theatre will be around. When the internet and movies and TV and smartphones and even books are gone, theatre will still be here. That’s real. That’s primal. That’s badass.

Until very recently in the human consciousness, theatre was always associated with God, in whatever form or forms she or he might take. And even though in much of the world (but not all) theatre is now a secular enterprise, everywhere in the world, the altar, the performance space, the stage, is still a sacred space. It is a space where creation happens. It is a space where magic happens. It is a space where the entire human experience is lived and *witnessed*.

We’re not badass because we cuss a lot or take off our clothes. We’re not badass because we take the easy path to provocation and titillation. We’re not badass because we go out of our way to offend and repel. We are Badass Theatre Company because we take that tradition of theatre, that history, that *calling* as a sacred trust; because one way or another, whether it’s tragic or hilarious, sexy or terrifying, brutal, gentle, tender, shocking, mundane, sacred or profane, we recognize that people come to theatre to see the truth, to experience the truth and to be transformed by it. We’re badass because we don’t seek answers, we generate questions. We’re badass because we know life doesn’t begin when the lights go up nor does it end when they fall. We’re badass because we’re filled with wonder. We’re badass because we know that life on earth is a blazing, tumultuous, fantastic adventure and we’re not just here to mirror it, we’re here to create it. We’re badass because we’re diverse, in all the myriad meanings of that word, not because it’s politically correct, but because diversity is the true face of the world. We call ourselves Badass because all the rivers of history come together in this one company and create a lake of fire and that is the fire of creation.

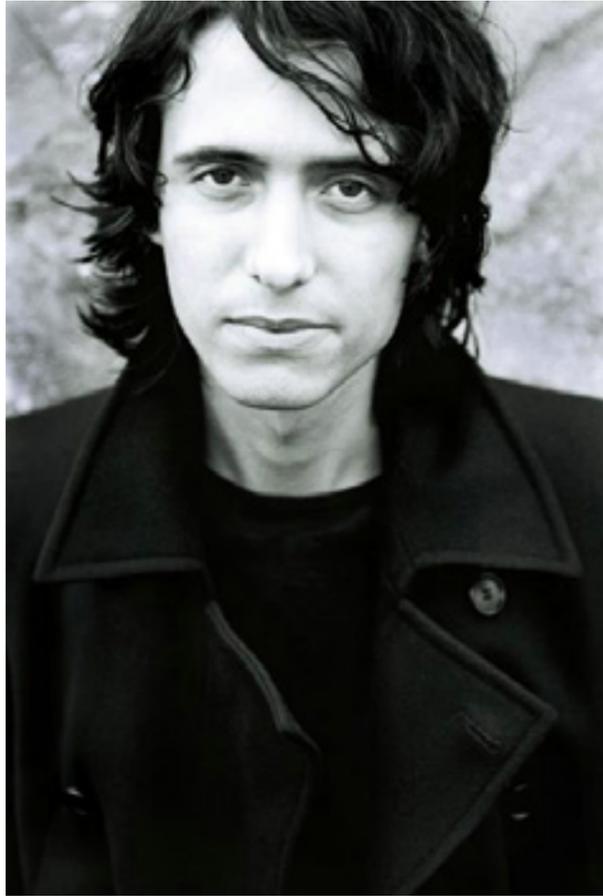
Badass Theatre is not just a theatre company, it’s a way of looking at the world, it’s a choice about the world you want to live in, and it is a means of participating. Our plan, our goal, our work is to change the world around us, by challenging, educating, entertaining and dazzling the world around us!

Take part.

## Sweden...isn't perfect

An essay from the Dramaturge

Jonas Hassen Khemiri



Sweden...isn't perfect. I know, it's a lot to take in, but take a few deep breaths, and I swear the panic will pass. Trust me I understand what you're going through. Like you I also thought of Sweden as the cool blue-green land where, many decades ago the great mother-ship IKEA landed unobtrusively, a great hardwood ramp quietly lowered itself to the snowy ground, and down came thousands of endearingly rumbling, navy-hued Volvos that spread benevolent socialism wherever they went, and caused lingonberries to grow like lucky charms. But this isn't so.

The reason it isn't so, I recently had expressed very succinctly to me by an actor that I have recently had the pleasure to keep company with, Gilberto del Campo. Gilberto had also just come to this startling conclusion because he had suddenly realized that Sweden, as he so elegantly put it 'is full of people.' And he's right, they have right-wing nationalists, and racists, and the mean, ignorant and confused in Sweden too. Needless to say, this was a revelation of Soylent-Green-proportions.

What started our conversation was an open letter by Jonas Hassen Khemiri, to Swedish Minister of Justice Beatrice Ask in response to the Swedish Government's Project REVA, a 2009 package of laws that, among other things, includes a provision that is almost identical to (and predates!) Arizona's "papers please" law, which grants police the right to stop and check the identification of anyone they suspect of not being a citizen. The impetus for Khemiri's writing was the fact that REVA had just recently been implemented in Stockholm.

Now Jonas Khemiri isn't just anyone. If he were then his *An Open Letter to Beatrice Ask*, printed March 13th of this year in the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (and reprinted in English in the April 2013 Issue of *Asymptote*) would not have already become the most linked text in Swedish history. The Swedish born, half-Tunisian playwright and author, has not only made quite a name for himself, but has done so writing about the experience of immigrants and outsiders in Sweden and around the world. His debut novel *One Eye Red* (2003), received the Borås Tidning award for best literary debut, and his follow up novel *Montecore: Silence of the Tiger* (English title, 2007) won a handful more awards. His first play *Invasion!* (2007) was cho-

Rachel Wilson-Broyles



sen for the Swedish Theatre Biennial. It has since been retranslated and played in several countries, always to rave reviews. In 2011 it debuted in New York where it ran for two seasons at The Play Company, was a New York Times Critic Pick, and won the Village Voice OBIE for playwriting. So yeah, no slouch.

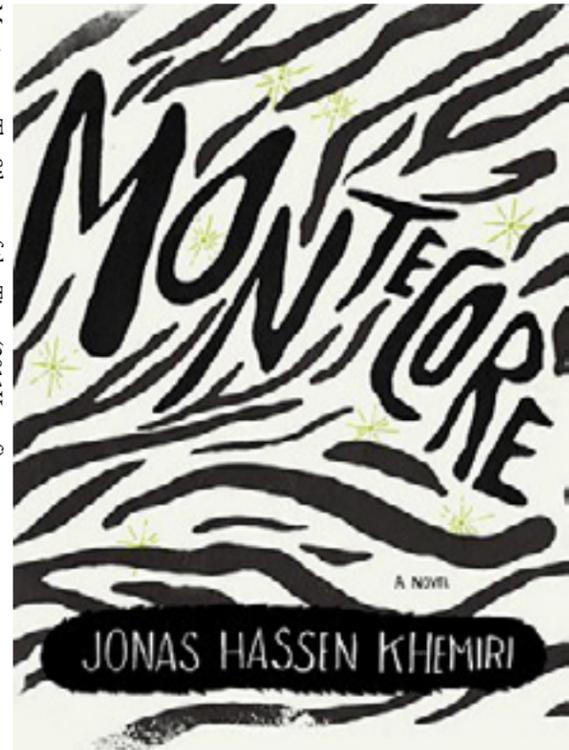
The article is in large part a catalogue of experiences that are singular to the other, the (in Khemiri's case, *perceived*) outsider. An index of memories of returning from family visits to Tunisia, and his father's nervous preparation for the inevitable stop at customs, after all of the "nice pink people had gone through." Being ID'd by cops because he and a friend were sitting outside a McDonalds and being conspicuously thirteen and not blonde. Hiding in a door way with the taste of blood in his mouth after being chased by skinheads for the first (and not the last) time at age ten.

I perhaps belabor the point, but it is to an end. I think it's important, especially for me as the company dramaturge, to put Khemiri's work, specifically *Invasion!* in context. This play is not anything as simple

as a response to 9/11, if such a thing could be simple, it's a response to growing up black haired and olive skinned in Sweden. It's a response to his life. The first version of the play, the one produced in Sweden was set in Sweden, and the playwright has said that he wasn't thinking of 9/11 when he wrote it. But yes, it must also be said that it is a play that is aware of its place in our "post 9/11 world."

When the play came to New York, many of those present for the first read-through responded: 'Wow, they have these problems in Sweden too? Huh, that's weird.' So it was decided to localize it for New York, a trend that has been followed by subsequent productions, including our own. While *Invasion!* has gone through a significant evolution since its first staging, with language changes, characters cut, and scenes expanded, the key thematic and structural elements have remained the same, including the names of George W. Bush and other notable members of his administration being anagrammed and re-deployed as academics and journalists who "study" the ever-present Abulkasem. Fear of the outsider has been a human constant. Fear of the Arab/Muslim male is nothing new; before Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda, we had Yasser Arafat, the PLO, and Hezbollah to be afraid of. But a contemporary play set in America, dealing with misconceptions and anxieties, born of fear and even of sympathy for the Arab/Muslim is difficult to view through anything but the lens of September 11th.

Yet to do that would be to miss the power of the play, which is the way Khemiri explores and prob-



ematizes language and translation. As a writer in any genre the hallmark of Khemiri’s work has been his use and stylistic creation of what might be called “outsider patois.” His first novel *One Eye Red* garnered both praise and not a little ridicule because his main character Halim speaks in what was incorrectly and derogatorily referred to by some in the Swedish press as “Rinkeby Swedish,” named so after the Rinkeby suburb of Stockholm which has a large immigrant population. In truth, Halim’s dialect is his own creation, full of intentional grammatical errors and mispronunciations, that he uses to gain control of a language that he does not feel is his own. In *Montecore*, which itself is a genre hybrid of (faux) autobiogra-

phy and epistolary novel, the character of Jonas writes in a strange and captivating second person register, where articles are dropped, words are compounded and newly coined, and his parents (who are the focus of much of the novel) are referred to in the plural “moms” and “dads.” Some of this style is present in *Invasion!* as well, with characters speaking lines like “Everything is nice mood, and best atmosphere. Up until she gets a bad conscience about her friends.” The result is both an attention grabbing, almost poetic, cadence and the marking out of characters as outsiders, without reducing them to “quaint” lower class stereotypes. The recent controversy over the Charles Ramsey interview comes to mind. Characters in *Invasion!* change language they way actors change costume, taking on different styles for different audiences. Language is also depicted as a means of control throughout the show. A better mastery of language, or of an established (if completely fallacious) discourse equals control of the narrative, even if that narrative is someone else’s life.

And then there’s the complex relationship the play has with the power and function of translation, which plays such an important role in *Invasion!*’s action, structure and history that it is difficult to know where even to begin. I suppose that first off I must mention Rachel Wilson-Broyles whose translations of both *Montecore*, and the American version of *Invasion!* are masterful and deserving of more praise than I have either space or words for. Suffice it to say that Khemiri, in every interview that I’ve read, has gone out of his way to note that without Wilson-Broyles’ skill and unique ability to grasp his intent, he would be nowhere. The next logical point of connection would have to be the now famous (infamous?) “apple picker scene,” but that I should leave to you to discover. The less said about that the better. There are also several subtle allusions to famous works in translation (like *Tintin*) and about translation (such as Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*) here and there that keep the idea of translation present throughout the show. Most important of all would be the role that *The Thousand and One Nights* plays both thematically and structurally in the



Two pages from the Galland manuscript, the oldest text of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Arabic manuscript,

Above even *The Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam, and the Nobel winning literature of Naguib Mahfouz, *The Nights* is the most recognized Arabic literary text in the Western world, and for good reason. Throughout the 18th and especially in the 19th century, there was a craze in the west for “exotic,” “oriental” folk tales, poetry, and erotica, especially in France, Germany and Great Britain where such works were favorite topics of salons and society circles. Characters like Galland, Lane, Hammer-Purgstall, and of course Burton took turns compiling, editing, translating and publishing their own versions of *The Nights*. And a few of them weren’t above slagging their competitor’s translations off in the press. I won’t digress into anything approaching a history of *The Nights* here, I promise, but it is worth saying that there were (and still are) no *definitive* Arabic versions of *The Nights*, and very few extant texts that even claim to be actual versions of *The Nights*. All of these historic manuscripts contain variations of the frame story of Sheharazade, Shahriyar, Dunyazade and Shahzaman, and different numbers, orders and versions of the stories told by Sheharazade to Shariyar, and often different tales all together. The tales themselves run the gamut from the moral and cautionary, to bawdy slapstick, and unabashed pornography. And always there is poetry. So each consecutive translator chose which stories to include (even going so far as to pull tales from other story collections and make a few of their own up for good measure), which order to place them in, whether or not to include the poetic digressions, and to (in the case of Lane and Galland) elide the bawdy and exclude the erotic, or (like Burton) to play them up to the utmost. And it wasn’t just the tales themselves that made their way into the western editions of *The Nights*. The most popular versions of *The Nights* included copious footnotes that “explained” the cultural references and mannerisms depicted in their texts. So it is fair to say (and oft said) that *The Thousand and One Nights* is not just the most significant western translation of Arabic literature, but the first “translation” of Arab/Islamic culture in the West.

This is a history that Khemiri is well aware of, and uses to great effect. Several of his characters adopt the names and mannerisms of those from *The Nights*. Structures of a few tales from *The Nights* are mirrored over onto the things that some of Khemiri's characters do, and go through. The way the tales in *The Nights* often flow from one to another at several levels of removal, is adopted in *Invasion!* as well, where A tells a story about B telling a story about C, and then A returns to finish things. In fact the main action of the play is the telling of other people's stories. In every scene, either in part or in whole, one or more characters tell the tale of someone else, or of an alternate version of themselves, to the audience, or another character, or to the very person they're talking about. All of which, as in *The Nights*, is set within a frame story that Khemiri...well, again I'll leave that to you to discover. Suffice it to say that he makes potent and unique use of the convention.

And all of this, is one dramaturge's nerdy, probably too longwinded way of saying that *Invasion!*, isn't just a lively and subversive satire that is powerfully funny even when it's being equally heart-wrenching. It isn't just a seven-year-old play that for all of the above reasons and more is as relevant, if not more so, now than the day it was first produced. Ultimately, it's the outsider telling back the outsider's story. And it's a story we would all do well to really listen to. It's about how not everyone in the Middle East is an Arab. Not every Arab is a Muslim. Not every Muslim woman in hijab is some sort of conservative anti-feminist, or agentless creature that needs our pity and protection. And certainly not every Muslim/Arab/Kurdish/Turkish/Indian/Christian/Secular/Half-Tunisian man is a freedom-hating terrorist. These are just the stories that we occasionally let ourselves be told. Oh, and that Portland, like Sweden...isn't perfect.



## Glossary of Terms and Names from the Program

**Corsair:** Also known as Barbary Pirates, were a naval force based in the North African port cities of Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, and Rabat-Sale' in Morocco. They were the frontline force of the Ottoman Empire in the naval conflict known as Barbary Wars, that raged from the 1500's up to 1821, when the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle which brought about the war's end.

**Abulkasem, Abu Al-Qasim:** *Qasim* means "Distributor" or "Giver," thus "Charitable." *Abu* is Arabic for "Father." In spoken Arabic, the "a" of the definite article (AL) is elided, leaving the "L" sound to connect the two words. Thus Abulkasem, or "Father of Qasim." The different spellings (K vs. Q) is the result of the difficulty in transliterating between Arabic and English. The Arabic *Qaff* is reminiscent of both K and Q but not equivalent. The playwright has set the convention of K when the name is spoken in English, and Q when in Arabic. And I'm a nerd, so I share this kind of stuff. Hey, you need something to read while you wait for the play to start right?

**Smoking Smarties:** A fad amongst Middle and High School students that began to gain notoriety around 2009 where the iconic sugary candy wafers were crushed into powder within their plastic wrapper and then inhaled and exhaled, producing the appearance of cigarette smoke. Don't Try This At Home!

**Frantz Fanon:** Considered one of the forefathers of modern Postcolonial Studies. Born in the French colony of Martinique in 1925, Fanon joined the Free French resistance in WWII, staying in France after the war to study medicine and psychology. Fanon became the Head of Psychiatry at the Blida-Joinville Hospital in Algeria not long before the Algerian War for Independence broke out. Horrified by the events unfolding around him, Fanon formally broke his ties with France and worked for Algerian independence. His writings, including *Black Skin White Mask*, and *The Wretched of the Earth* would go on to influence such notable scholars as Homi K. Bhabha, and Edward Said.

**Zemblian:** A fictitious language from the fictitious "far northern European" land of Zemba portrayed in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*.

**Deaths among asylum-seekers:** The five cases mentioned of suicides of asylum-seekers in *Invasion!* are all purported to be true. While we have only been able to verify three, and partially verify a fourth, there is ample evidence for a correlation between delayed or denied asylum and increased risk of suicide. For more information see articles by Amy Goldstein and Dana Priest in The Washington Post, including their special report "Careless Detention: Medical Care in Immigrant Prisons" available online at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/immigration/index.html>

# Invasion! Outline

## I. Almquist's Intro

### a. The Play

*"Don Silvio Luna blah blah blah"*

### b. Lance

*"Go home? What means? Go home? Why?"*

### c. The Etymology of Abulkasem

*"It became the perfect word. But of course sometimes there were misunderstandings"*

### d. Arvind meets Lara

*"I'm Abulkasem! The name like takes over and fills me with calmness."*

## II. The Panel of Experts on Abulkasem's Birth

*"He was born, grew up, lived a completely average life in a completely average refugee camp."*

## III. Demon Director

### a. Lara gets locked out and meets Arvind

*"The monologue starts with me standing outside my door and swearing so much it echoes in the stairwell."*

### b. Lara tries to tell her seminar group about Aouatef, and is still locked out.

*"What's your opinion of Muslim cultural traditions?"*

## IV. Expert Panel on Abulkasem's Escape

*"We make a particular memory game where all the pictures represent Abulkasem in different disguises."*

## V. The Apple Picker

*"In order to minimize the risk of linguistic misunderstanding I have chosen to tell my story in Arabic."*

## VI. Panel of Experts on Abulkasem's Arrival

*"Thanks! Well done. So now we've come to our last picture and it is an historic one..."*

## VII. A Little Brother's Ending.

*"Silence. Gradual darkness."*

*The stage lights go off abruptly.*

*The End"*

## Question 1

Much of the action of the play comes out of the telling of other people's stories. Breaking up into groups, pick a scene or two and decide if this is happening in your scene(s). If so discuss who is telling whose story, what that story is, and what is the effect of that story. Share your results with the class.

## Question 2

The power of language is a major theme of the play. The Experts scenes are great examples of this. Look at the following excerpts and discuss how The Experts use language and to what ends.

### **Scene 2. The Panel of Experts on Abulkasem's Birth**

**A/The Guide:** Hmm...So there's nothing in Abulkasem's childhood that can explain his violent future? No weapons? No fundamentalism?

**C/Expert 2:** Not as yet. As a youth, Abulkasem is still naively untouched.

**B/Expert 1:** Although...Chi Yen Deck points out that Abulkasem's father was very hateful. He beat his wife and assaulted his daughters.

**D/Expert 3:** Precisely. "It was a perfect breeding ground for terrorism," writes Deck in the biography published by Doubleday in 1987.

### **Scene 4. The Expert Panel on Abulkasem's Escape**

**A/Guide:** But what about all of you? Are you still after him?

**B/Expert 1:** All the time...we hunt him with laser sights and radar, satellite images and smart bombs.

**C/Expert 2:** We make a particular Memory game, where all the pictures represent Abulkasem in different disguises...

**D/Expert 3:** Abulkasem is a deported asylum-seeking apple picker.

**B/Expert 1:** Abulkasem is Lance, a struggling dancer.

**D/Expert 3:** Abulkasem is Arvind, a stuttering telemarketer.

**B/Expert 1:** Abulkasem is Aouatef, a female demon director.

**C/Expert 2:** On the other side is a reminder of the seven-figure reward and the number of the tip line...

### Question 3

The problems of asylum-seekers are referenced explicitly or tangentially in the last three scenes of the *Invasion!*. The topics of asylum and immigration are full of thorny questions, all of which cannot be raised, much less dealt, with by a single play. On a separate sheet of paper make notes on the following questions and then discuss your responses with the class.

1. How do you feel about the way the play presents the issue of immigration and/or asylum?
2. The title *Invasion!* resonates with a lot of issues raised in the play. How do you think that the name of the play causes tension with the topic of immigration?
3. Has *Invasion!* changed in any way how you think about immigration?



### Question 4

*Invasion!* is nothing if not irreverent. At several points in the play Khemiri makes use of numerous stereotypes. In groups talk about which stereotypes he uses and why you think he did, then apply the following questions:

1. To what end was this stereotype deployed at this point in the play?
2. Did it make you angry, and even if it did, do you think it was an effective use of stereotyping, or did it seem gratuitous?

### Question 5

Obviously the “character” of Abulkasem plays such a significant roll in *Invasion!* that a lot could be said. One way of looking at Abulkasem’s place in the play is how the character functions on a structural level. To that end, using the outline provided decide how Abulkasem is used in each scene and then see if you can find any method in the proverbial madness. Do you think that the playwright presents Abulkasem in different ways in each scene to make a specific point, or do you think it’s random? Either way, what function do you think Abulkasem plays in *Invasion!*?



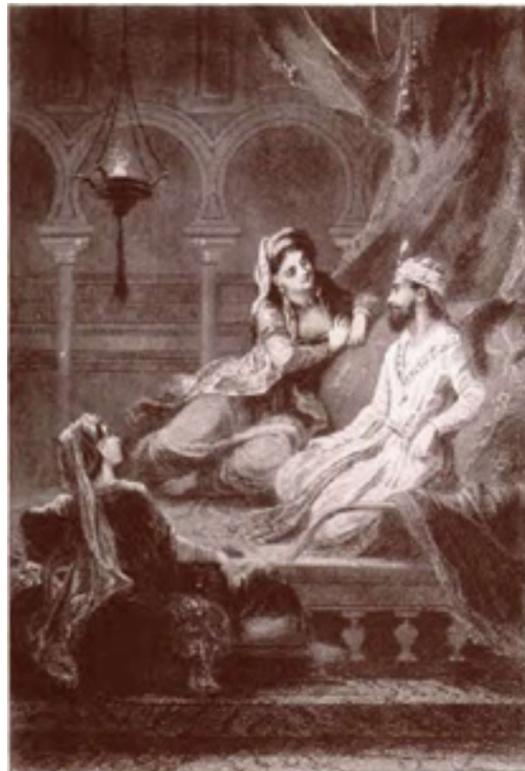
## Question 6

### Extra Credit

The playwright has taken inspiration from numerous sources. Chief among these is *The Thousand and One Nights*. Read the following stories and decide which scenes in *Invasion!* they inspired and how. Just as a warning, these translations were done more than 200 years ago, and to put it bluntly, include sections that run from the crudely scatological to the terribly racist. The blame for this, in particular the latter, should be laid only on the translators and not on the original authors whose texts served as the basis for the translations.

1. *The Story of King Shahryar and his Brother* ([http://www.wollamshram.ca/1001/Vol\\_1/vol1.htm](http://www.wollamshram.ca/1001/Vol_1/vol1.htm))
2. *Sindbad the Seaman and Sindbad the Landsman* ([http://www.wollamshram.ca/1001/Vol\\_6/vol6.htm](http://www.wollamshram.ca/1001/Vol_6/vol6.htm))
3. *The Tale of the Kazi and the Bhang-Eater* ([http://www.wollamshram.ca/1001/Sn\\_4/vol14.htm](http://www.wollamshram.ca/1001/Sn_4/vol14.htm))

The links provided are to the Burton translations. If you want, there are other versions of the first two stories available. The first tale is in fact the frame narrative of *The Nights*, and the story of the seven voyages of Sindbad is available online in numerous other translations, and as a standalone collection. The tale of the *Kazi and the Bhang-Eater* is only in the Burton translation.



*Shahrazad relating a story to the Sultan*

## Further Reading

*An Open Letter to Beatrice Ask: By Jonas Hassen Khemiri* (Reprinted in *Asympote*, April 2013)  
<http://asymptotejournal.com/article.php?cat=Nonfiction&id=47>

*Capturing the Incapturable: An Interview with Jonas Hassen Khemiri*: *Slant*. Spet 13, 2011  
<http://www.slantmagazine.com/house/2011/09/capturing-the-incapturable-an-interview-with-jonas-hassen-khemiri/>

*Subversive Tongue and a Sharp Focus on Identity Politics*: *New York Times*. September 8, 2011  
[http://theater.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/theater/jonas-hassen-khemiri-the-playwright-behind-invasion.html?\\_r=0&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1369194533-M0EBynv82W8kByQ+EE8Osw](http://theater.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/theater/jonas-hassen-khemiri-the-playwright-behind-invasion.html?_r=0&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1369194533-M0EBynv82W8kByQ+EE8Osw)

*Careless Detention: Medical Care in Immigration Prisons*: A Multipart investigation on suicide, unexplained death, and medical malpractice in ICE detention. *Washington Post*.  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/immigration/index.html>

*Denial and Delay: The Impact of the Immigration Law's "Terrorism Bars" on Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the United States*. *Human Rights First*, November 10, 2009  
<http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/RPP-DenialandDelay-FULL-111009-web.pdf>

Irwin, Robert; *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*. Tauris Parke Paperbacks, (2004).

*Invasion!* Study Guide: Compiled and written by Ian Goodrich.  
Except: *The Badass Manifesto*, by Bobby Bermea



*Badass theatre Company's inaugural season is a sponsored project of Fractured Atlas, a non-profit arts service organization. Badass Theatre Company's Season Sponsor is Ronni Lacroute/WillaKenzie Estate. INVASION! is Sponsored by Charlie and Darci Swindells. Badass Theatre Company's Venue Sponsor is Miracle Theatre*

