

A Distinct Society

by Kareem Fahmy

The Library Where Families Can Be Together...

A quiet library that straddles the border of the U.S. and Canada becomes an unlikely crucible for five people from around the world. When an Iranian family, separated from one another by the "Muslim ban," use the library as a meeting place, the head librarian, a U.S. border patrol officer, and a local teenager have to choose between breaking the law and saving themselves.



The Haskell Free Library and Opera House



From the Playwright

"The play's inspired by a remarkable real place, a library that sits on the border of the U.S. and Canada that has become a safe space for Middle Eastern families separated by Trump's 'Muslim ban.'

"It's a little bit of all the things that define me: Canada, the Middle East, America. I grew up in French-speaking Canada, and my family was one of the few English-speaking ones in our neighborhood, and definitely the only Muslim one. That feeling of otherness and isolation was definitely a defining quality of my growing up. I managed to overcome that and find my tribe of theatre people (outsiders attract other outsiders!)"

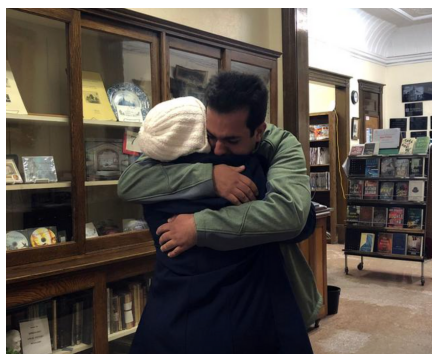
- Kareem Fahmy, sourced from an interview with Adam Szymkowicz

Kareem Fahmy is a Canadian-born director and playwright of Egyptian descent. Find out more about Kareem through his website: <https://www.kareemfahmy.com/>



A painted line on the floor inside the library indicates the US/Canadian Border

"You're going to ask me to leave aren't you? I'm a danger to your library."



An Iranian student in the US hugging his mother goodbye at the library

"You're not quite in the US, and not quite in Canada. Somewhere in between I guess."

About the Library

While the library and the circumstances around it are real, the characters and events in this play are entirely fictional.

"This year, as migrant families from Latin America were separated at the U.S. southern border, a more nuanced reality has been playing out on the northern frontier with Canada. Here, dozens of Iranian families have reunited at the Haskell library. Drawn by word-of-mouth and a smattering of social media posts, they have come to the geopolitical gray zone at the rural frontier library, located at once in Derby Line, Vermont, and Stanstead, Quebec. The Iranian families have undertaken fraught, costly journeys for the chance of a few hours together on the library's grounds." -Sourced from the article "[Separated by Travel Ban, Iranian Families Reunite at Border Library](#)" by Yeganeh Torbati

Meet the Cast



Left to right: Barzin Akhavan as Peyman, Declan Desmond as Declan, Marika Engelhardt as Manon, Susaan Jamshidi as Shirin, Kevin Minor as Bruce

NORTHLIGHT
THEATRE

To learn more about Northlight's Education Programs visit Northlight.org/education or contact our Education Manager, Alexi Siegel at asiegel@northlight.org

Before the Play, Consider...

What are the effects of nationalism on the relationships & identities of the characters?

Border Control

In this play, we witness how bureaucracy can put strains on the relationships and actions of others. The role that history and culture play in these restraints is important to consider. The Department of Homeland Security was created following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In response, the Border Patrol's mission expanded from apprehending undocumented immigrants and disrupting drug smuggling to protecting the nation from terrorism.



"It used to be no one bothered with the border...like it wasn't even here."

Protestors gather outside of US Supreme court

However, a culture of racism, along with the rise of white nationalism and xenophobia has led to the persistent dehumanization of migrants, racial profiling of citizens and noncitizens of color, and punitive policies that create desperate and dangerous conditions for those seeking a home in America. In 2017, as a part of Executive Order 13769, entry into the United States was suspended to specific countries such as Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. This order provoked widespread condemnation and protests with some calling it a "Muslim ban."

After the Play, Discuss!

Where can you find connections between the treatment of immigrants in America and the treatment of Declan in his school?



Bloc Québécois supporters

A Distinct Society in the Real World

Nationalism also plays a role in Canada. Québécois nationalism asserts that Quebec and the Québécois people are a nation, distinct from the rest of Canada. It promotes the unity of the Québécois people in the province of Quebec. The concept of "Distinct Society" distinguishes Quebec from English Canada. This concept originated during the Quiet Revolution, a period of intense socio-political and socio-cultural change in the Canadian province of Québec.

"Even though I speak French, those frogs treat me like I'm trespassing."

One outcome of this rise of nationalism led to language laws in Quebec that promote the use of French and restrict the use of English are believed to reflect goals designed to preserve and strengthen the French language within the province, which is criticized as excluding non-French speakers. Since 1867, the Quebec provincial government has had full jurisdiction over schools as well as other provisions that has deeply alienated English-speaking Quebecers, like restricting where English speakers have access to English taught schools, and preventing the English from public signs. The deep history and division between Quebec and the rest of English Canada is a tension that still exists until this day.

In what moments did you see the characters in the play grapple with the tension of following the law or staying true to their own beliefs?



U.S. Border Patrol Agents

Additional Resources

"The Reawakening of Quebec's Nationalism" Dan Bilefsky

"French Canadian Nationalism" by Richard Jones

"The Legacy of Racism within the US Border Patrol" Katy Murdza, M.A. & Walter Ewing, Ph.D.

"Muslim Travel Ban" Immigration History

Take a Tour of the Haskell Free Library and Opera House!

To learn more about Northlight's Education Programs visit Northlight.org/education or contact our Education Manager, Alexi Siegel at asiegel@northlight.org

NORTHLIGHT
THEATRE