

Review The Fall of Granada

Theaterkrant

Washing-up racks, chicken wire and toothbrushes cast shadows of a fallen Muslim empire

Hotel Modern and Abdelkader Benali were brought together by the extraordinary history of Spain. In 2023, these artists and theatre makers got to know one another while working together on a television series about the Dutchman Jan Janszoon, who in the seventeenth century migrated from his home in Haarlem to Morocco, where he became a pirate and converted to Islam. They realised they knew surprisingly little about the history of Islamic Spain and the fall of Granada, after which all Jews were forced to convert to Catholicism or leave the country if they didn't want to end up being burned at the stake; a little over hundred years later, Muslims would meet the same fate.

Benali tells the story through his uncle in Morocco, who – like many Jews and Muslims in the country – still feels a nostalgic longing for the grandeur of Granada and Córdoba. These cities are the legacies of a great Muslim empire that started in 711 CE and ended in 1492 with the fall of Granada. Despite internal wars and the constant threat of Christian armies advancing from the north, the sciences and arts flourished here, and Muslims, Jews and Christians lived together in relative harmony.

Hotel Modern usually work with scale models and projections, but when preparing this production they decided to use a shadow-play technique to summon the vestiges of a largely forgotten past. Placed in front of the specially designed lamps, the objects positioned on the three tables onstage take on the form of gardens, cities and execution pyres.

As Hotel Modern's Pauline Kalker, Arlène Hoornweg and Herman Helle create shadows of fluttering butterflies, Benali begins to tell the stories of notable figures from the history of Al-Andalus. The three members of Hotel Modern then also gradually transform into these men and women of the past. Helle, for example, becomes Abbas ibn Firnas (810–887), the Andalusian forerunner of Leonardo da Vinci. The experiments of this scientist, inventor and engineer, who was one of the first people to attempt to fly, inspired later developments in aviation. And other intriguing and little-known details emerge, such as that the Arabs who ruled Spain introduced the toothbrush, glassware, cutlery and the three-course meal to Europe.

What makes this production especially telling is the way Hotel Modern once again conjure an entire universe from everyday objects – transforming dish racks, rolled-up chicken wire, glue pots, whisks and toothbrushes into a vibrant city of shadows. One of the most powerful scenes depicts an execution pyre, built from a rotating platform and tongue-shaped strips of orange cellophane. And all the while, the soundscape by percussionist Chris Saris intensifies an already unsettling atmosphere.

Similar techniques are used to portray the death of a woman who makes couscous with aubergine, an act for which she is arrested by the so-called 'aubergine police'. Pauline Kalker – who previously co-created *Kamp*, the Hotel Modern play about her grandfather, who was murdered in Auschwitz – was keen to incorporate stories about

the city's Jewish population. And so they bring to life the Granadan-Jewish poet Khasmuna, or Qasmūna bint Ismā'il. And in one particularly humorous scene, set in the famous library of Córdoba, a German-speaking visitor discovers that the library contains treasured books that cannot be found anywhere else.

At times the pace slows somewhat, as the cast take their time to build the scenes. But this shift in cadence is quite welcome, because it also slows down Benali, whose has a tendency, born out of enthusiasm, to tell the story quickly and with excessive urgency. The sense of calm heightens the tension and impact of the woman's arrest for preparing a Muslim dish. This scene is particularly haunting because we are witnessing with our own eyes something that occurred five centuries ago, in a Spain where all freedoms were denied: if you didn't think like the Catholic monarchs, you had to leave the country or face the stake.

Following the performance, the audience were invited onto the stage to see how the final scene was created: electric toothbrushes are used for lampposts, rolled-up chicken wire topped with a whisk forms a residential tower, a mouse wheel serves as a Ferris wheel, and glue pots, dish racks and an oil-and-vinegar set evoke an entire city. Together, they seem to symbolize our fragile society, in which the shadows of the past have returned.

Marjan Terpstra

Theaterkrant , march 2025