

Review

The Fall of Granada

Friesch Dagblad

A unique artistic alliance: Abdelkader Benali and Hotel Modern

A unique artistic alliance: Abdelkader Benali and Hotel Modern In the advertising world, there's a well-chosen term for two distinct identities joining forces to create a new product: co-branding. A good example is the Senseo coffee machine made by Philips and Douwe Egberts. You find this form of collaboration in the arts, too, especially on the stage, with partnerships between the likes of Freek de Jonge, Het Nationale Theater and The Nits.

At first, the idea of writer Abdelkader Benali joining forces with Rotterdam's Hotel Modern to create 'something' may not seem obvious. But a closer look reveals that both bring their distinctive, expressive voices to conjure a visual reality that is moving, inventive, and confrontational.

Their partnership grew out of a joint historical television project, during which they discovered how limited their knowledge was of Spain – particularly of Moorish Islamic Spain and its reconquest (*Reconquista*) by Christian forces in the late Middle Ages. This shared gap in knowledge became their artistic driving force. Islamic rule in Spain ended with the completion of the Reconquista, the Catholic conquest of Granada in 1492. With this, the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) entered a new era – one in which the traces of Arab civilisation, art, culture and science continued to endure and remain visible.

The Arab world

The Fall of Granada begins with Benali telling the powerful, compelling story of his journey as a young boy from the Netherlands to Morocco. Once there, his uncle recounts the vibrant, vivid and fragrant history of this Arab world. His uncle speaks of a community in which Muslims, Jews and Christians lived together in peace, while Hotel Modern's Herman Helle, Pauline Kalker and Arlène Hoornweg deploy a variety of inanimate objects to project their visual version of his story onto the backdrop. In their hands, toothbrushes are instantly transformed into street lamps, toilet brushes become Mediterranean pine trees, chicken wire models form traditional Spanish homes influenced by Arab styles, and deodorant bottles are towers in an idyllic skyline – and all the while, Chris Saris' evocative music beautifully enhances this imaginative vision.

We see all these objects arranged across three large tables onstage. Using specially designed lamps, each with their own meaning and character, Hotel Modern brings them to life to accompany the stories told by Benali. In some ways the visuals resemble a Javanese shadow play, although the sticks used in this form to move hands and feet are absent – for the static objects on the

tables, at least. The free-flying birds, however, move through the scene, with the ever-present and continually creative cast members sometimes performing themselves. Hotel Modern's unique theatrical language is intact and as distinctive as ever here, but with Plato's cave of shadows now serving to reflect our imaginative powers.

Compelling

The overall result is a compelling audio-visual experience in which the writer (with his stories) and Hotel Modern (with their unassuming objects) bring an entire new universe to life. While this universe lies far behind us in history, and has faded from our collective imagination, we still feel its consequences in the religious violence of today. The book burnings, the destruction of hearth and home, and the arrest of the 'aubergine woman' who does not abide by the rules of the new rulers, are all too readily transposed into a contemporary reality. The urgent message of *The Fall of Granada* is evident, and deserves to be heard loud and clear – certainly if it can be told in the way it is here.

Abdelkader Benali and Hotel Modern offer the best of two worlds, showing how art and reality can merge into a single, powerful whole – one that jolts us awake and holds our attention. See this show and experience this outstanding artistic convergence for yourself.

by Wiggele Wouda, Friesch Dagblad

october 2025
