

Review *The Fall of Granada*

De Groene Amsterdammer

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Spotlights cast magnified shadows of the miniature buildings standing on three tables, creating the contours of medieval Granada on the white backdrop surrounding the stage. Clotheslines hung between rooftops flutter in the wind; we hear the breath of writer Abdelkader Benali as he stands at one of the tables, blowing on a string of cardboard clothes. Then, in a harbinger of what is to come, Pauline Kalker passes a handful of fluffy material through the projection beam, causing dark clouds to loom over this city of shadows.

Hotel Modern's *The Fall of Granada* tells the story of the flourishing and the falling of the Moorish kingdom of Al-Andalus, in Spain. At its centre stood the vibrant city of Granada. Before the Spanish Inquisition overpowered the city in 1492, Muslims, Jews and Christians lived together there. The emphasis that this fact receives from guest performer and storyteller Benali contrasts with worldly reality, and allows for a degree of romanticisation of the now vanished Granada.

The nested narrative begins with Benali's Moroccan uncle taking his nephew back to the centuries-long Spanish era of their Arab ancestry and bringing to life several illustrious figures who lived in Granada. They bear witness to a pre-Christian renaissance: astronomer, inventor and scientist Ibn Farnas, for example, created a 'flying apparatus' here as early the ninth century, and made a gliding dive from a tower wearing armour with movable wings; musician and lifestyle innovator Zyriab transformed dining habits by introducing the three-course meal, as well as a self-made deodorant for personal hygiene; and Hebrew poet Qasmouna broke the taboo on female poets – we see her recite her poems among the clotheslines on the rooftops.

Benali's florid language bring these city dwellers to life in a sensual, urbanist vision, while Hotel Modern conjure rich scenes of shadows, using handcrafted figures, household objects, cut-out miniature facades, and small wire and lace constructions. We see layer upon layer of openwork materials and subtle gradations of grey and scale achieved by manipulating the objects' distance from the light sources. Flowers, trees and enormous insects evoke a natural paradise before Benali reveals that 'Wherever the Arabs came, they first made a garden.' Live musician Chris Saris, meanwhile, heightens the narrative impact of the shadow images with his associative music and impeccably timed sounds.

There is constant motion in the backdrop shadows: of tiny figures in the urban landscape scurrying past lights or turning on carousels; of a chronicler, off to one side, busily dipping a quill into an inkwell; and of the performers themselves – as well as manipulating the miniature objects, the cast act out human-scale scenes as they move among the tables,.

While it does get a little sentimental at times, the cumulative effect is utterly breathtaking. In the scenes depicting the Christian conquest – when smoke clouds from the burning of Jewish books hang over the city – Arlène Hoornweg plays a woman being burned at the stake for preparing a Muslim dish. Herman Helle uses miniatures to animate whirling orange flames on the backdrop around her shadow, which is surrounded by other figures mounted on stake poles. In the final scene, Ibn Farnas takes one last dream-flight over the smoke-filled city.

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De Groene Amsterdammer, 22 January 2026