

Calligraphic clues to culture connections

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Writing With The Hip, Belvoir Downstairs

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ACCORDING to James Joyce, Irish cats say "mkgnao". English-speaking pussies in Australia tend to make do with "miaow". At one point in *Writing With The Hip*, the performer Saleh Saqqaf describes the sound of an Arabic-speaking cat. He describes it in two ways - as a vocal sound and as a piece of calligraphy.

In this newspaper, trapped in the Roman alphabet, the sound cannot be reproduced either phonetically or in script. Yet the cultural and linguistic interconnections of writing and speaking are the crucial concerns of the excellent *Writing With The Hip*, firmly located somewhere around the hyphen in the phrase "Arabic-Australian".

The piece takes much of its performative language from the sensuous, twining forms of Arabic calligraphy. Writing is projected all over the Belvoir back wall and floor, and the forms traced with feet and hands. The performers, Saqqaf, Alissar Gazal and Elizabeth Jabour, are constantly inscribing - from chalk marks on the back wall to felt-tipped words on a prop, using bodies, using hands, even a fax machine.

At one level, writing is a code for sound, for speech. *Writing With The Hip* initially breaks speech back into its syllabic elements, deliberately echoing children being taught language. Yet the syllables are Arabic and, as Jabour points out, at 27 she is learning her (Arabic) ABC.

Sounds become dance rhythms, too, helped by an excellent score from [Khaled Sabsabi](#). Martha Jabour and Sarah Goffman did the wonderfully textured and projected set. Barry Gamba was dramaturge.

As a monoglot, I am aware that this piece has another level open only to those who can decode the Arabic lettering. Yet this scarcely matters (and is indeed one of the points). Most of the scripted sections are performed in English and when not, they're accompanied by easily-intelligible physicality.

This Carnivale event by TAQA Theatre is an exciting and fascinating insight into a space of cultural collision. And it's not nearly as earnest as it probably sounds - there's much cultural humour in here and Saqqaf's tale of counting Arabic into an English-speaking breath-testing machine is hilarious. Challenging, but kind of wonderful.

Writing With The Hip runs until September 18.