



Oregon  
Shakespeare  
Festival

# 2022 Study Guide



## Protest!

The Syrian War is featured in *unseen*. In the war there were events that happened where people took actions to be “seen.” Here is one of the instigating events where protests were seen.

**July 2000:** After 3 decades of rule by the Assad family, Bashar al-Assad succeeds his father pledging reforms.

- He breaks up and privatizes state monopolies which primarily benefit those well-connected with the regime and harm rural peasants and urban laborers.
- A record-setting drought from 2006 - 2010 intensifies socio-economic problems.

**2011:** Inspired by uprisings in neighboring countries against oppressive rulers, fifteen adolescent boys spray paint a wall with pro-democracy graffiti in the city of Deraa. Police arrest and torture the boys which sparks the first Arab Spring protests in Syria.

- More than 100,000 people protest against Assad across Syria.

**2015 - Present Day:** Eleven years since the first demonstration against the four-decade rule of the Assad family, hundreds of thousands of Syrians have been killed and some twelve million people—more than half the country’s pre-war population—have been displaced.

**In the play, Mia is a conflict photographer. Why is it important that photos of conflicts are seen?**

## *unseen* by Mona Mansour



Evren Odcikin,  
photograph by Jenny Graham

**Evren Odcikin is the Associate Artistic Director and Director of Artistic Programming at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.**

- This production of *unseen* is his directorial debut at OSF.
- He is a director, writer, and arts administrator with a deep commitment to championing underserved voices and stories in the American theatre.
- Recognitions include a “Theatre Worker You Should Know” selection by American Theatre Magazine; a National Director’s Fellowship from the O’Neill, NNPN, the Kennedy Center, and SDCF; the TITAN Award from Theatre Bay Area; and being selected as an Emerging Theatre Leader by Theatre Communications Group for their Leadership Bootcamp.
- He was born and raised in Turkey.



## Mona Mansour

- \* American playwright of Middle Eastern descent who grew up in Southern California but now lives in Brooklyn.
- Mona’s father is from Lebanon, which was a huge influence on her childhood. Her plays about the Middle East draw on her father’s world to some degree.
- \* Mona started writing plays in elementary school.
- She was a member of The Public Theater’s Emerging Writers Group and a resident playwright at New Dramatists.
- In 2019 she co-founded the theater company SOCIETY. The focus of SOCIETY is to create new work using a method of research, improvisation, and discussion.
- Awards: 2020 Kesselring; 2020 Helen Merrill; 2012 Whiting; 2014 Middle East America Playwright; MacDowell Colony 2018.

## Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research Israel's 2008 War on Gaza. What were the main objectives Israel's Defense Minister gave to justify launching a military offensive against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip? What specific locations/groups did Israeli forces target? How did Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups respond to this attack? Who were the ultimate victims of Israel's war on Gaza? These and other websites provide information: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20181227-remembering-israels-2008-war-on-gaza/> <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20181208-former-israel-pm-ordered-targeting-densely-populated-areas-in-2008-gaza-war/> <https://imeu.org/article/operation-cast-lead>
2. Research the Goldstone Report. What is considered a war crime? What instances of war crimes were found to be committed by the Israeli Army and Hamas/other Palestinian militant groups? What was Israel's reaction to the Goldstone report? What was Hamas' reaction to the Goldstone report? These and other websites provide information: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/04/11/turning-blind-eye/impunity-laws-war-violations-during-gaza-war> <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-goldstone-report-behind-the-uproar/> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/14/goldstone-report-history>
3. Research Syria's Civil War. What social-economic issues led to massive civil unrest among the Syrian people? What pivotal event became the catalyst for nationwide protests? What were the protestors asking for? How did the Syrian government respond to these protests? These and other websites provide information: <https://www.cfr.org/article/syrias-civil-war> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35806229>

Sultanhanı Portal, Turkey, Wikimedia Commons



Compare the traditional Turkish design in this picture ...

4. Research Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) among victims of war. These and other websites provide information: [https://theconversation.com/veterans-refugees-and-victims-of-war-crimes-are-all-vulnerable-to-ptsd-130144#:~:text=PTSD%20is%20very%20prevalent%2C%20ranging,and%20civilian%20victims%20of%20torture.&text=Those%20who%20get%20to%20leave,four%20years%20for%20Ilan%20Omar\).](https://theconversation.com/veterans-refugees-and-victims-of-war-crimes-are-all-vulnerable-to-ptsd-130144#:~:text=PTSD%20is%20very%20prevalent%2C%20ranging,and%20civilian%20victims%20of%20torture.&text=Those%20who%20get%20to%20leave,four%20years%20for%20Ilan%20Omar).) <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2021-08-05/palestinian-children-face-constant-and-unique-trauma-in-gaza-experts-say>

**“If you're shooting conflict. You have to find a way to not really look, or it will all start to sink in...”**

5. Research the life of a war photojournalist. What risks and dangers do they face when working in a war zone? What are the lasting effects of witnessing so much death and destruction? How do they prepare for this line of work? What motivates them to put their lives at risk to do this work? These and other websites provide information: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-physical-psychological-toll-photographing-war> <https://fstoppers.com/photojournalistic/dangerous-and-incredible-life-war-photographer-430739> <https://time.com/wissam-nassar-at-home-in-gaza/> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/18/lens/shooting-war-photographer.html> <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/jul/26/life-and-death-as-a-war-photographer-netflix-series>
6. Research Burundanga. These and other websites provide information: [https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2016/09/22/in-english/1474538538\\_985157.html#:~:text=Burundanga%20is%20the%20popular%20name,of%20inhibition%20and%20memory%20lapses](https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2016/09/22/in-english/1474538538_985157.html#:~:text=Burundanga%20is%20the%20popular%20name,of%20inhibition%20and%20memory%20lapses) <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/mind-controller-1>

## After Seeing/Reading the Play

1. What is the significance of the play's title? How does Mia's interaction with Salima in the first scene illuminate the meaning of "unseen"? Who are the unseen in the play? In the scene? And why do they remain hidden/voiceless?
2. Refer to your research on Israel's War on Gaza. What motivates Salima to continue rebuilding a community that is consistently destroyed every 2-3 years? What does she fear will become of the next generation growing up amid war if they don't have a focused skill or an education?
3. How does Mia's perspective on war in the Middle East as a photojournalist differ from Salima's perspective as an activist helping to rebuild/heal a war-torn community? Why does Salima laugh at Mia finding moments of humanity, hope, and beauty amid death and destruction? What's the difference between hope and survival?
4. Refer to your research on PTSD. What signs of PTSD does Mia display when she fully wakes up in Derya's apartment? Why does Derya try to avoid telling Mia the circumstances of how and where she was found? Why does Mia start to panic when she can't find her bag with her cameras and laptop?
5. Refer to your research on the life of a war photojournalist. Why doesn't Marian usually like to work with young photojournalists? What does she imply about the world of photojournalism? What reasons does Marian give for no longer working in the field? Why does she choose to work with Mia?
6. What important advice does Marian give Mia in order to have a lasting career as a war photojournalist? In what ways does Mia take her advice? When, in the past, has she been unable to take the advice? Why?

7. How does Mia use her past romantic relationship with Derya to cope with her current reality? What does this say about how their relationship ended? What does Derya do to snap Mia back to the reality they are in? What role is PTSD playing in their relationship? Based on events that happen in the play, what is the future of their relationship?

**“I always supported her doing this work, because I thought she could bear the cost of witnessing. What is the cost of being a witness?”**

8. Refer to your research on the life of a photojournalist. What about the fast-paced life of a photojournalist would make drugs and alcohol appealing and ultimately lead to addiction? In what ways is Mia managing her addiction while staying in Derya's apartment? In what ways is she not? Why does Derya feel that drugs and alcohol may play a part in Mia's condition?
9. Refer to your research on burundanga. What are the dangers of taking burundanga while working in a war zone? Why does Mia take burundanga without asking what it is or how it will affect her? As Mia is uncovering the events she cannot remember, why is she shocked that she willingly took burundanga?
10. How does Jane approach caring for Mia differently than Derya? What effect does this have on Mia? What does this reveal about Mia's relationship with her mother? How does Derya feel about Jane's approach to helping Mia? How do Jane and Derya work together to help Mia? How are they at odds about the way they care for Mia? How is this influenced by culture and their relationship to Mia?

2022 *unseen* set rendering, designed by Mariana Sanchez



... with the set design.



11. Why is Mia disillusioned with the impact of her images on the world? How does she feel about the media's influence the way her images are perceived? What are the different ways her images are perceived by other characters in the play? How do the images hurt and when do they help and heal?

12. Why is Mia uncomfortable discussing her career as a war photojournalist during her first date with Derya? How does she navigate Derya's very direct questioning about her war images? In what ways does Mia's work create a wedge between her and Derya?

13. How does Derya's strict Muslim upbringing as well as Turkish culture influence how she navigates the world as a queer woman? How does she rebel against her strict upbringing? What risks does she face in Turkey as a member of the LGBTQIA community? How is Derya also part of the "unseen" community that the play is titled after?

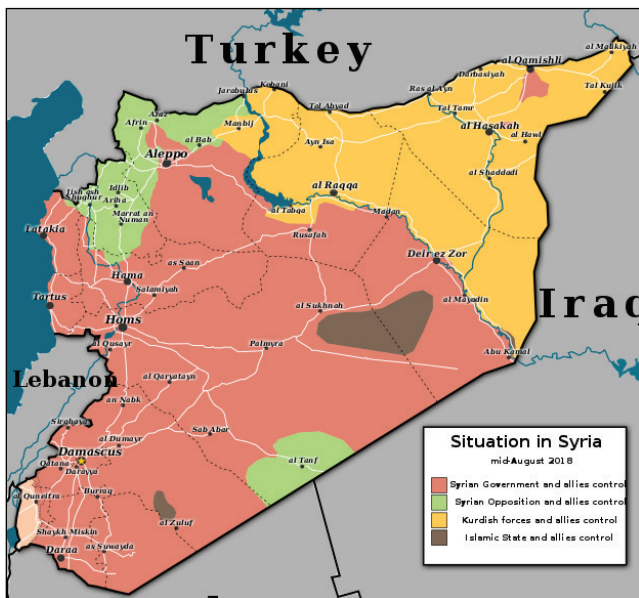
14. Why does Jane find it difficult to understand that Derya considers herself Muslim even though she doesn't practice Islam? What does this say about Jane's world view and exposure to other cultures?

How does Mia feel about her mother's world view? How does Jane's world view change by the end of the play?

15. There are three mothers in the play: Jane, Nancy, and Aisha. How do these mothers deal with Mia's photographs? What do they see when they look at the photos? What do they feel is unseen? How does Mia deal with their responses to her photos? How do their responses to her photos contribute to her condition?

16. Why is it difficult for Jane to look at Mia's photos? Why is Mia hurt that her mother cannot look at her photos? Why does Jane choose to keep the unseen photos?

17. How is Mia healed, if she is healed, at the end of the play? What does she learn about herself through her journey in the play? What is "seen" by Mia at the end of the play? What is "seen" by Derya? Jane?



2018 Map of Syria with Turkish boarder, Wikimedia Commons



The Gaza Strip, Wikimedia Commons

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