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SPRING THEATER; Eight to Watch, Onstage and Behind the Scenes

By JASON ZINOMAN (NYT)
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Omar Metwally
Actor
"Sixteen Wounded"

When Omar Metwally read the script for "Sixteen Wounded," he says, his first thought was "Oh, no, not another portrait of an Arab terrorist." Set in Amsterdam in the early 1990's, the drama, which opens April 15 at the Walter Kerr Theater, is about, among other things, the relationship between a Jewish Holocaust survivor, Hans, and a radical Palestinian medical student, Mahmoud, whose parents were killed by Israeli soldiers.

As the son of an Egyptian father and a Dutch mother, Mr. Metwally, 29, is upset at the way American popular culture perpetuates stereotypes about Arabs. "But I read the script again and mulled it over and ultimately felt that this character was very complex," he said, sitting in a Park Slope diner near his apartment. "There were things that troubled me, but also things that excited me."

After taking the part, Mr. Metwally, who has chiseled features and a slight build, expressed his reservations to the playwright, Eliam Kraiem, 30, who is also making his Broadway debut. "He said, 'Why does this character have to hate Jews?'" said Mr. Kraiem, the son of an Israeli father and an American mother. "I'd have to justify it to him and in the play. Nobody had challenged me like that before. It was good for me."

"Sixteen Wounded" is the rare play that attempts to understand what drives a terrorist to commit crimes, and this is ultimately why it appealed to Mr. Metwally. "Mahmoud is a young man who grew up under extraordinarily difficult circumstances and experienced lots of pain that informed the course of his life," he said. "Some people want no part of that. Giving a terrorist the slightest bit of humanity is an affront. It's easier to see them as less than human."

Mr. Metwally, a member of the Rude Mechanicals company as well as Nibras, a troupe of Arab-American actors, received glowing reviews for his performance when the play had its premiere last year at the Long Wharf Theater in New Haven. The Broadway production, directed by Garry Hynes, will have a tightened script and a mostly new cast, including Martha Plimpton, Jan Maxwell and Judd Hirsch as the baker.

While the play's portrayal of a terrorist will undoubtedly receive the most attention, Mr. Metwally insists that the politics are just a backdrop to a character study, a consideration of how people respond when their identity is threatened. "We are intending to put human beings onstage," he said. "Human beings with many sides. Some of which are likable, some of which are not."