

Kismet

a musical by George Forrest and Robert Wright

An Arabian Night

One evening about 150 years ago, a small boy was sitting alone in a classroom. He'd been left to spend Christmas at boarding school and he huddled down by the fire to read the *Arabian Nights*. As he read, a figure sprung out of the flames – Ali Baba, with a turban on his head, an axe in his belt, and a donkey at his heels. Then a genie appeared, then a princess, then Aladdin... and for the rest of that magic evening the boy watched the people from his story book come to life.¹

Kismet

That schoolboy would have enjoyed *Kismet*: it's practically the whole *Arabian Nights* on stage. The show is set in Old Baghdad, a city of bazaars, dancing girls and magic lamps (and very different from the sad modern town). It was premiered in New York in 1953, ran for 583 performances, transferred to London, and clocked up another 648 nights. The score, based on the works of the Russian composer Alexander Borodin, was arranged by Robert Wright and George Forrest. They did their job so well that Borodin got a Tony Award for 'Best Musical' 66 years after he'd died. *Kismet* might seem an odd choice for an opera company to put on (though the score calls for large operatic voices) but it's a natural for the London Coliseum. The Coliseum, home of the English National Opera, is the largest theatre in London and was famous in the 1950s for the big American musicals that filled its stage.

The Characters

Kismet is set in Old Baghdad, about a thousand years ago. It follows the adventures of a poet, **Hajj**, and his beautiful daughter **Marsinah**. Hajj gets into trouble with a robber chief, **Jawan**, the police chief, **Wazir**, and Wazir's attractive wife, **Lalume**. Marsinah manages to fall in love with a handsome young prince, the **Caliph** of Baghdad, who is wandering round the city in disguise.²

¹ You can find the boy and his book in Charles Dickens's *Christmas Carol*.

² Putting on a disguise was about the only way a prince could have an adventure in the *Arabian Nights*.

The Show

The story is pure Musical: a tangle of dancing girls, broken hearts and a comic hero to sort it all out. The fun of the show is in the spectacle, the dance routines, and the perfect fit of words to music. You'd never guess, when you hear the song 'And This Is My Beloved', that the music wasn't written for those words, but it's actually taken from one of Borodin's string quartets.

The Plot

In a recent review, *The New York Times* cut the plot down to two sentences: "The characters include a cunning poet, his winsome daughter, a handsome Caliph, an evil but dim-witted Wazir and his exceedingly lusty wife. As for the plot, oh, you know: winsome daughter meets cute caliph, cunning poet meets lusty wife, with ensuing complicated detours before love is allowed to assert its natural sway."

That resume will probably get you through the show but, as you might prefer a longer version, here it is.

(The song titles are in *Italics*)

Act I: Where is Hajj?

The curtain rises in Old Baghdad. The sun is just rising and an Imam sings *Sands of Time* as some beggars enter, wondering what's happened to their old friend 'Hajj'. We never find out – or meet the real Hajj – but another beggar enters and he appropriates the name, under the following circumstances.

The new beggar is a poet and he settles down to sell his rhymes, as his daughter Marsinah nips off to steal some fruit for breakfast. Nobody wants to buy poetry and the beggar begins to curse the stingy people of Baghdad. He is overheard by an enormous brigand who, remembering that Hajj was good at cursing, assumes that the poet is he, and kidnaps him for his master – the robber chief, Jawan.

Jawan has been looking for Hajj for years. A long time back the missing beggar cursed Jawan, who promptly lost his small son. Naturally Jawan wants the curse removed and the poet, swiftly adopting the name of Hajj (by which he is known for the rest of the show) and agrees to reverse the curse for a 100 gold pieces. Jawan hands him a bag of gold, and both men return to Baghdad, the robber to look for his son, Hajj to spend the money.

A Debt

Meanwhile the city has woken up, the Bazaar is in full swing, and the chief of police, Wazir, arrives in procession to meet three beautiful sisters, the Princesses of Ababu. He owes their father, the King of Ababu, a great deal of money and he's promised to pay it off by marrying one of the girls (or all three, if he's lucky) to the Caliph of Baghdad. The girls think Baghdad is rather a

hole, but Lalume (Wazir's wife) convinces them that it's the most exciting place on earth.

"Baghdad!" she sings, "Don't under-estimate Baghdad.

Baghdad! You must investigate Baghdad.

South of the Garden of Eden,

North of the Gulf of Aden,

Where every man and maiden

Celebrates - Baghdad!"

Trouble

Marsinah runs on: she's been caught pinching fruit and is pursued by a furious greengrocer. Hajj tosses the man a coin, gives Marsinah half his money and leaves her surrounded by merchants trying to sell "*Baubles, Bangles and Beads...*" At which point, enter the Caliph of Baghdad (in disguise). He is greatly struck by Marsinah's beauty and follows her offstage, just as Hajj re-appears, straight from the slave supermarket with a bargain pack of slave girls. The poet is swooped on by the police: they're looking for Jawan, and they find Hajj's sudden increase in wealth deeply suspicious. Hajj tries to bribe them, and that does it: the coin he offers has the crest of a family recently robbed by Jawan and he's arrested on the spot.

A Garden

Meanwhile, Marsinah has spent her money more sensibly on a house and garden. She is sitting amongst the fruit trees when the Caliph slips in (pretending to be a gardener). The young people are instantly attracted to each other and sing the show's hit number, *Stranger in Paradise*. The Caliph leaves and some policemen appear, to comment on the situation: "*He's in Love...*"

A Palace

At Wazir's Palace, Hajj is on trial for theft. Wazir is unconcerned with trifles like evidence and witnesses and all Hajj can do is curse him - when Jawan is brought in. The robber recognises a family medallion round Wazir's neck and hails him as his son. Wazir is appalled, his father a thief! He sentences the old man to death immediately and Jawan is hustled off, but not before he has paid tribute to Hajj's amazing magical powers.

A Curse

Wazir looks at Hajj with alarm: the poet has just cursed him, what should he do? Execute him before he causes any more trouble? Fortunately the Caliph chooses this moment to enter. He tells Wazir that he's not going to bother with the three Princesses after all: he's fallen in love with a commoner, and he intends to marry her tonight. With this the inconsiderate young man exits, leaving Wazir in a state of collapse: if the Caliph won't marry one of King Ababu's daughters, he'll be ruined. How can this have happened? Of course Hajj's curse! He begs Hajj to reverse the curse, and Hajj agrees. He's egged on by Wazir's beautiful wife, Lalume, who realises that Hajj is no more a magician than she is - but she's taken a fancy to him. She distracts Wazir by bringing in dancing girls from the Harem, and Hajj quietly escapes.

Act II: The missing bride

It is night, and the Caliph arrives outside Marsinah's house with a wedding procession, and a very clear idea about how the evening is going to pan out, (*Night of my Nights*). Inside, Marsinah hears the procession, but thinks only of her handsome gardener. Hajj enters and orders her to escape with him immediately, Marsinah refuses, rows with her father and the pair run off – in opposite directions. When the Caliph enters, he finds his bride has disappeared.

The missing gardener

Wazir is told that the Caliph has lost his bride, and puts it all down to his new 'wizard'. He tells Lalume to keep the great man happy, and she and Hajj begin to plan a trip to a "small oasis, a week's travel by camel" when Marsinah enters. She and her father make it up and, before she retreats into hiding in Wazir's Harem, she begs Hajj to find her lost love, the gardener. Oddly enough the Caliph, in the next room, is ordering Wazir to find *his* beloved, and providing an exact description (*And This is my Beloved*).

A forced marriage

Wazir, hoping to convince the Caliph that wanting only one wife is just a phase, shows him his Harem through a peephole. The Caliph cries in anguish, he can see Marsinah amongst the other women... Wazir hasn't got a clue what's going on, but swiftly claims the girl as one of his wives. "In that case" says the Caliph, "I might as well marry one of those Ababu princesses..."

Wazir swiftly marries Marsinah himself³. His bride privately decides to kill herself – but not before nightfall.

Everything sorts itself out

That evening the Caliph watches various princesses dancing before him: Princess Zubedya of Damascus, Princess Samaris of Bangalore, and the Three Ababu Princesses. He is completely uninterested.

Hajj is looking frantically for Marsinah and is buttonholed by Wazir. Could he make sure the Caliph picks one of the Ababu girls? He also thanks the 'wizard' for putting the Caliph's beloved in his own harem. "I've married her" he adds, "pretty little thing, her name's Marsinah"

Hajj pulls a knife, then thinks of a less messy way of killing the evil old man. He produces a blank plaque and, throwing it in a pool, proclaims that when it's pulled out it will reveal the name of the Caliph's bride. He slips Wazir another tablet, with the name of Ababu on it, and tells him to hide it in his boot, get the blank plaque from the pool – and make a switch. Wazir agrees but, as he approaches the pool, Hajj trips him and holds him down until he drowns.⁴

³ This was a very quick ceremony in Old Baghdad and didn't depend on the bride's consent.

⁴ A rather gruesome moment for a musical: but Wazir would never have been able to repay his debt to the King of Ababu, so perhaps it's for the best...

Hajj turns to the Caliph and explains exactly why he has killed Wazir – clinching the argument by having Marsinah brought in. The young couple fall into each other's arms and the Caliph pardons Hajj at once. But the poet turns him down. He rather be punished he says, by being "banished to some dreadful oasis ... at least a week's journey away by camel," and made to comfort Wazir's widow in her "grief." Well, that's fine too and the couples join up for the final chorus, as Hajj reflects on the fleetingness of *The Sands of Time*.

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