

The Beekeeper of Aleppo – 2026 production

syndicated interview

Premiering at Nottingham Playhouse in 2023, *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* was praised for being a contemplative, gripping and powerful adaptation of Christy Lefteri's bestseller. Written by Nesrin Alrefaai and Matthew Spangler and directed by Miranda Cromwell, it toured the country and is now being restaged, with Director of UK Productions Ltd Martin Dodd saying of the story about a couple fleeing Syria and seeking safety in the UK: "Given world events, it has never been more relevant."

But for Anthony Almeida, who is directing the new production for its 2026 tour, the issues at the heart of the story are actually timeless. "History is full of tales of migration, travel, love and hope," he says. "Yes, it's very much a vital story for now, but even though it's very specific about a particular people's geography and experience it asks, 'How do you get your face out of the dirt and feel the sun on it?' as a metaphor for life, hope and a better tomorrow."

The story revolves around beekeeper Nuri and his artist wife Afra, who are forced to flee the Syrian city of Aleppo when all that they care for is destroyed by war. Heading for refuge in the UK, they're on a perilous journey whilst also contending with unbearable loss.

Presented by Nottingham Playhouse and UK Productions, the restaging is described by its director as "a moving, thrilling, thinking night out" and Anthony says of what drew him to it: "I think theatre can only survive as an art form if it feels relevant and contemporary, but what I'm also looking for are stories about a collective shared humanity. *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* deals with a certain type of lived experience but within that story are themes that connect universally no matter what race, creed, ethnicity or country you're from and no matter what part of the wealth spectrum you're on."

Christy's novel and Nesrin and Matthew's script also have a mythical element for Almeida, who feels: "It's a story that goes all the way back to Odysseus and the Greeks. It's about a journey and a search for home, as it asks, 'What does home mean? Is it a place or is it a person?'" Almeida hadn't read the book until he signed on, but when he did he fell in love with it. "For me as storyteller, it always has to be an act of love," says the director whose theatre credits include a revival of Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and the operas *Heroine: Sancta Susanna*, *Bluebeard's Castle* and *The Turn of the Screw*. "I was drawn in by the questions at the heart of the story and I'm excited to be giving it a theatrical, three-dimensional life that exists tangentially with the novel."

For the new tour some changes have been made to the visual aesthetic of the staging and the sound design, Kane Husbands has been brought in as Movement Director and original composer Elaha Soroor has provided new compositions. Some scenes have been reordered and new lines of dialogue added. "It's not just a cut-and-paste job," says Anthony, "and while we have two returning actors, most of the cast are new, so they bring their own humanity, soul and point of view to it."

For Adam Sina, who leads the cast as Nuri, the play represents the chance to explore "a nuanced and complex character, a sensitive man who is struggling to come to terms with the oppressive environment that he was brought up in and is searching for a purpose in life". Nuri is introduced to the craft of beekeeping by his cousin Mustafa. "And he finds a spirituality in that," Adam says, "and it gives him that purpose. It gives him a foundation upon which to live his life." Adam can relate to Nuri's softer side. Without giving spoilers about the plot, the father of two says: "I'm quite sensitive too, but I've never been exposed to the pressures that he has. To even imagine what he's experienced is unbearable, and at every performance I have to go through that process of loss and grieving. That's an incredible challenge." Hailing from Newcastle upon Tyne, Sina trained at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. His screen credits include *Tyrant*, *Casualty* and the new series of *The Witcher*, while on stage he has worked with the National Theatre and appeared in *The Motive and the Cue* and *Dr Strangelove*. Of British-Iranian descent, he understands the difficulties of navigating the immigration system because of his American wife Sylvia. "In supporting her through the process of getting her British citizenship, I know how costly and time-consuming it is and how many potential wrong turns a person could make with legal support, never mind doing it off your own back."

For research Adam visited drop-in centres for refugees. "And that was a real eye-opener because they spoke to me about the process of preparing for those big interviews which you see depicted in our play. It's frightening to think about the reality of that." His father moved from Iran to England in 1979, aged 16, and was afforded every opportunity to make a life over here, start a family and further educate himself. "In contrast, I think about the reception that the modern-day migrant or immigrant receives in this country and I'm appalled. This play offers me an opportunity to contribute to the dialogue that seems to be ongoing and to offer a counter opinion - one that promotes more empathy as opposed to hateful rhetoric."

But *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* is not, Adam is keen to stress, a didactic, preachy piece of theatre. Rather it's rooted in the ultimately heartwarming story of Nuri and Afra and the people they meet on their journey. "We focus on the personal story," he points out, "and we hope that the audience gets invested in these two characters and the rest of the ensemble. We focus on the intimate personal relationship between this couple, then hopefully people will leave considering the broader issues within the play."

The story also resonates with Dona Atallah, who plays a boy named Mohammed. Dona was born in Lebanon to a Lebanese father and Syrian mother, and she moved to the UK two and a half years ago to pursue a career in acting. Having graduated with a performing arts degree and trained at the Lebanese American University in New York, she wound up at Mountview drama school in London. Her CV includes *Anne Boleyn the Musical* and *Ashmahan: A New Musical Play* as well as concert performances of *Music of Zimmer vs Williams* and *Carols by Candlelight*. *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* represents her biggest challenge to date, since she's a 25-year-old girl playing the nine-year-old boy whose companionship Nuri finds comfort in. "But I have a youthful, playful energy that I can tap into," she smiles, "and he's such a fun character. He's clever, witty and cheeky."

"Like Nuri, he's been through wars and trauma and I think when children go through such things they become very smart and they ask a lot of questions. It's all about channeling the energy that he has and his inquisitive nature, thinking about how he'd react and the questions he'd be asking." For Atallah, the play feels like she's reconnecting with her heritage. "I love all the details in the script, like the teasing interactions over dinner and how in Lebanon and Syria we deal with hard things by laughing about them."

Nuri and Afra's often fraught journey from Syria to the UK doesn't mirror her own. "I'm lucky because my circumstances were very different," she says. "I got to come here as a student and be accepted. The visa process for all of that can be tricky, but I've been very fortunate that I get to be here and do a job that I love."

Asked what she hopes audiences will take away from seeing the play as it tours the UK, Dona muses: "I want them to see these characters for what they're really like, not for how they perceive them to be from what they're seen on TV or read in the media. Hopefully they'll come out of the theatre and be a bit kinder to others, and I hope that the play sparks conversations, helps them to see both sides of the story and maybe changes someone's mind or at least helps them understand a different point of view."

Anthony Almeida agrees. "Theatre is at its most exciting when it's a place of debate and discourse," he says. "In *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* any politics that are there come from a personal connection and the relationship at the heart of the story. I want people to leave feeling seen and represented, whatever their mindset, and to feel both challenged and entertained."