

# The Believers Are But Brothers: See it, believe it, and think really hard

November 1, 2018 by Colin Thomas [Leave a Comment](#)



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*For the (very) full experience, leave your phone on during The Believers Are But Brothers. (Photo by The Other Ri*

*The Believers Are But Brothers* is about the internet and it's *like* the internet: it's bursting with information and I'm not sure how to make sense of it, but I find it really fucking stimulating.

In *The Believers Are But Brothers*—the title comes from the Quran—writer and performer Javaad Alipoor is particularly interested in those areas of the internet where young men, politics, and violence overlap.

One of his stated aims is to complicate the narrative of the dangerous young Muslim who gets radicalized online and, to a significant degree, he succeeds in that complication. Alipoor uses statistics: he informs us that, of the three million Muslims living in the UK, fewer than 300—a minute percentage—have joined Isis. (The figures in this [Guardian](#) article are somewhat different.)

But the more resonant complication comes in the stories that Alipoor chooses to tell. For the record, Alipoor is British and comes from a Shia Muslim background.

Two of his main characters, Atif and Marwan, are based on real young men whom Alipoor met online. Both are Muslim Brits and both travel to Syria, but neither fits the jihadist stereotype. Like a lot of foreign recruits apparently, Atif fails basic training—which is kind of hilarious—and ends up working in the Isis equivalent of tech support. Marwan, who joins a non-Isis militant group, is haunted by the image of a suffering Syrian girl.

And things get good and complicated with the introduction of Ethan, a 22-year-old white guy who's hanging out in his bedroom in his parents' house in Orange County. Alipoor based Ethan on Elliot Rodger, the young man who went on a killing spree in California in 2014, murdering six people and wounding 13—largely, it seems because he thought it was so unfair that he was still a virgin at 22.

Through Ethan, Alipoor accesses the darkly misogynistic world of the alt. right, where Trump may be seen, Alipoor speculates, as the “Social Failure in Chief.” Here, we learn about [GamerGate](#), the enraged reaction to feminist criticism of the gaming industry, which resulted in a flood of rape and murder threats against feminist commentators.

Unsurprisingly, members of the alt. right have objected to Alipoor associating them with Muslim militants, but the playwright makes a compelling case. Both alt. right and radical Islamist online communities are largely made up of resentful young men who find entertainment in violent imagery on the internet. And, in their online communities, members of both groups seem to find a longed-for sense of identity and belonging.

For me, the most chilling observation in *The Believers Are But Brothers* is that, not only is the medium the message, our technology significantly inflects our modes of thinking: our brains are our cellphones. In the show, Alipoor notes that, for him, significant conceptual shifts take place gradually over time but, for some of the guys he talked to online, huge changes in perception were virtually instantaneous. And perhaps that’s possible because our realities are becoming increasingly virtual, untethered from our bodies and physical communities. As Alipoor says, “On the screen, no one chews anything.”

Alipoor doesn’t really get into the systemic reasons that cultures seem to be crumbling so significantly these days—what’s happening at the intersection of economics and gender, for instance—or why some young men who are raised in comfortably middle-class homes are so deeply bitter. This refusal makes watching *The Believers Are But Brothers* frustrating but productively provocative: I spent ages afterwards trying to talk these ideas through with friends. And I’d much rather see a provocative show than a polemical one.

Theatrically, the textures of *The Believers Are But Brothers* are seductive—and perhaps just a bit too much of a good thing.

On that front, Alipoor’s most audacious move is to make WhatsApp part of the show: before the performance, audience members are invited to join a WhatsApp group. Doing so allows you to receive messages during the event—and to sass Alipoor back if you feel like it. But the storytelling is already dense and, theatrically, there’s a lot going on: Alipoor addresses us directly, with or without a mic, depending whose story he’s telling; sitting at a desk, he speaks into his laptop with his back to us and the image of his face is projected onto a screen; a guy named Luke Emery, who is visible behind that screen, is busily running the show; and the screen is sometimes filled with the kind of imagery that feeds the likes of Atif, Marwan, and Ethan—although, thankfully, Alipoor never exposes us to the full violence of that kind of pornography. Then there’s the presence of Alipoor himself: charming, loquacious, playful, unapologetically bright, and associative.

On top of all this coolness, I sometimes found the WhatsApp element annoying. When messages and core narrative information were coming at the same time, I lost chunks of one if I paid attention to the other. But maybe overload is part of the point. And, at the end, there’s an effective series of WhatsApp messages that doesn’t have to compete with anything else.

That series includes the sentence, “The tools we use have always shaped us.”

Yikes. *The Believers Are But Brothers* is explicitly not an indictment of social media, but it still scares me.

I highly recommend *The Believers Are But Brothers*. It will give you an essential workout.

**THE BELIEVERS ARE BUT BROTHERS** By Javaad Alipoor. Co-directed by Javaad Alipoor and Kirsty Housley. Produced by Luke Emery. Presented by The Cultch and Diwali in BC. In the Vancity Culture Lab on Wednesday, October 31. Continues until November 10. [Tickets](#).

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