The title of Yussef El Guindi's new play, "Back of the Throat," refers to an attempt by the lead character, an Arab-American writer named Khaled, to tell the government agents who show up at his door how to pronounce the first syllable of his name.

This task, the need to identify and explain oneself, has become a familiar one since 9/11 to Arab-Americans, who often find themselves the subject of both curiosity and fear. For playwrights, though, this twin desire, has turned out to be an opportunity.

"For the longest time Arab issues or Muslim issues just had not been on the radar," said Mr. El Guindi, whose play has its New York premiere today at the Flea Theater. "They were regarded as too complex."

"The subject was just "too edgy," he said. Then came 9/11. "Suddenly there were calls for plays," he added.

Mr. El Guindi is one of a small group of Arab-American playwrights who have gained a higher profile since the terrorist attacks. Their work, they say, is partly designed to counter stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims.

That effort has also helped unite a scattered and diverse group of immigrants and second- and third-generation Arabs, Muslims and Christians alike. "Prior to Sept. 11, I felt the Arab community was a lot like the Mideast itself, made up of insular communities," said Heather Raffo, a half Iraqi and half American playwright who was raised as a Catholic. She wrote and acted in "Nine Parts of Desire" about contemporary Iraqi women. "But since that time it's become an immediate, all-inclusive, wanting to create together."

In Chicago, the playwright Jamil Khoury (his father is Syrian, his mother is Polish and Slovak) and his partner Malik Gillani, founded the Silk Road Theater Project after 9/11 to showcase plays about the countries along that historical route, from China to Europe and including the Middle East.
After 9/11, Nibras, an Arab-American theater collective based in New York, performed "Sajjil," Arabic for "Record." It was an ensemble piece based on interviews with Arabs and non-Arabs about what they think when they hear the word "Arab." The collective includes Nathalie Handal and Najla Said, the daughter of the scholar Edward Said. The production won a Fringe Festival Award in 2002.

And in San Francisco, Golden Thread Productions was founded in 1996 to present theater about Middle Eastern culture. It co-produced the first performance of "Back of the Throat" in 2005.

"Throat," which runs through March 8, is about an Arab-American writer who after the Sept. 11 attacks is suddenly caught up in a Kafkaesque encounter with federal agents.

To Mr. El Guindi the terrorist attacks were "hideous." But in the days after, he said, he and his Arab-American friends began to feel increasingly paranoid.

Seattle, where Mr. El Guindi lives, is a liberal city, he said. "Friends were questioned, friends of friends," he said. "The Patriot Act came in, and suddenly you didn't know what your rights were. You started hearing these stories of people getting stopped for what they were reading at airports, of the F.B.I. going to galleries and questioning the artist if the exhibit was politically charged."

"I began to look at my apartment," he continued. "What do I have in my apartment if an F.B.I. agent came in? I have books on assassins, guns, Islam, research materials, the Koran, that would identify me as interested in the Middle East. In my paranoia, I started to imagine what could happen."

In the play, the agents who arrive at Khaled's rather messy apartment couldn't be more polite at first. "We appreciate this," says one, Bartlett, (Jason Guy). But slowly, things turn ominous. As the skein of insinuation unfolds, a chance encounter by Khaled (Adeel Akhtar) with a terrorist (Bandar Albuliwi) is distorted by the agents into a conspiracy.

For all its atmosphere of menace, though, the play has humor. At one point, Bartlett gives Khaled an evaluation form. "We're trying to get direct feedback from the public," he says. "Especially from our target audience."

Mr. Guindi said he doesn't feel obligated to write about politics. "I wish there were more political plays," he said. "The problem with the
American theater is it's not addressing what's going on."

At one point a look of anxiety crossed his face and he clutched his cheeks when talking about politics. "Am I being too political?" he asked.

Politics is almost always a subtext in Arab-American plays. Prominent among them is Ms. Handal, who wrote "Between Our Lips," about a Palestinian woman about to be executed for her husband's murder. Betty Shamieh's play "Roar" is about Palestinian-Americans in Detroit during the Gulf War. Skip to next paragraph

But certain issues can be trigger points within the Arab-American community. In 2002, the Cornerstone Theater in Los Angeles commissioned Mr. El Guindi to write a play as part of a cycle about different religious communities. The result was "Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith," about an Arab-American family in which the younger generation questions its parent's traditions. At a staged reading, "conservative elements in the Muslim community objected because of the gay character," Mr. El Guindi said, adding, "There's also a son who begins to question his religion."

Mr. El Guindi, 45, is of Muslim heritage, but he said "I'm not very religious." He has lived in the United States since 1983 and has been a citizen since 1996. His voice is lightly inflected with a British accent from his childhood in England after his family fled Egypt in 1963 when Gamal Abdel Nasser began nationalizing their businesses. His Arabic, he said, is rudimentary.

He graduated from American University in Cairo in 1982. "My father said I should get to know my own country," he said. He then came to the United States and got a Master of Fine Arts at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

One reason Mr. El Guindi is an important playwright, said Dina Amin, a director and professor at the University of Delaware who studies Arab-American theater, is that "although he is of the first generation, he tries to see the Arab-American predicament from within the second."

Mr. Khoury of Silk Road said that conservatism within Muslim culture may be one reason for the scarcity of Arab-American playwrights. Representations of the human form are frowned on, he said: women dancing, or performing in front of men is considered reprehensible.

And until now, at least, Mr. Khoury said, "there was a sense among Arab-American writers who may be interested in theater that there was
not going to be an outlet for being produced."

Ms. Amin said that "publishers are not interested in the plays unless they are stereotypical, unless they deal with topics like veils or female circumcision."

But many of the playwrights insist their stories are universal. Ms. Handal said a non-Arab woman in the audience can identify with "Between Our Lips," "not because they're Arab but because they're a woman, a daughter."

To Ms. Said, "Arabs are just like any ethnic group." She has written a performance piece based on her first visit to Palestine with her father. She said that growing up in New York, with many Jewish friends, "I might as well have been Jewish."