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# Philly Fringe 2023: Joseph Ahmed presents *Half Magic*



Krista Mar

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| In Theater

| 3 minute read



No ordinary boxes: Joseph Ahmed in 'Half Magic.' (Photo by Wide Eyed Studios.)

Fringe is my favorite time of the Philly theater season. It's a chance for local performing artists like Joseph Ahmed to showcase the full range of their creative talents. He captures the heart of the Fringe in his solo show, *Half*

*Magic*, an autobiographical exploration of grief and mixed-race identity through theater, circus, and storytelling, running in this year's Cannonball Festival.

A set featuring piles of boxes with various handwritten labels (scenic and props designer Sara Outing) greets Fidget Space audiences. Ahmed enters the stage on the phone with his dad. Through the conversation, we learn that Ahmed was expecting to begin the monumental task of sorting through his late mother's belongings with his dad, but he'll now have to shoulder the job himself. Bereft of his original support, Ahmed breaks the fourth wall and implores the audience to help him sort the boxes into piles of "trash" or "treasure." Some boxes are easy to categorize—mom's remedies (treasure), 2014 taxes (trash)—but many more fall somewhere in between.

The boxes aren't just any ordinary U-Haul boxes but portals into Ahmed's past. These excellent props transform into backpacks, dollhouses, and more. Ahmed grew up in suburban New Jersey with a stay-at-home white mom and a working, mostly absent Bengali father. In a world where most conversations about race center around Black and white and schoolyard bullies pummel inconsequential differences into social hierarchies, Ahmed turned to books to find belonging, escape, and solace.

Ahmed revisits three childhood favorites, each lovingly inscribed with a note from his mother: *Ender's Game*, *Harry Potter*, and *Half Magic*. In a particularly memorable scene, we watch Ahmed grow up alongside Harry Potter. Ahmed quickly switches between familiar bits of Harry's story and his own, juxtaposing Harry becoming a wizard with Ahmed's finding his own magic through theater. As Ahmed grows up, he no longer idealizes these books, whose authors are saddled

with accusations of racism and homophobia. He finds the courage to share his own story.



*Circus tricks bring levity to difficult topics: Joseph Ahmed in 'Half Magic.'* (Photo by Wide Eyed Studios.)

Expertly directed by Cat Ramirez, Ahmed successfully blends theater, juggling, and balancing into a cohesive story, using physical theater and circus tricks to add levity to difficult themes and topics. Books are juggling blocks, abstract representations of characters, and props. Some tricks aren't perfect: sometimes this is clearly intentional, for dramatic effect, but sometimes it seems not entirely planned. This messiness is something Ahmed leans into and rolls with, perhaps to symbolize the complexities, mess, and imperfect choices faced in life. As he reaches the climax of his story, he mirrors this physically as he climbs on top of a pile of boxes and balances objects, his medical decisions for his mom becoming increasingly perilous and fraught.

This whimsical and emotionally powerful piece—both startlingly personal and universally relatable—is a meditation on grief, a heartfelt exploration of self, and a

for third-culture kids, children of immigrants, and misfits alike, as he seeks to build dialogue and community for those who need it most.

*Half Magic* is produced in solidarity with Rachel O’Hanlon-Rodriguez’s Fringe show, [\*She Was a Conquistazhore\*](#), which Ramirez also directs. Ahmed, O’Hanlon-Rodriguez, and Ramirez are all mixed-race theater artists who previously collaborated on Theatre Exile’s 2022 production of [\*Today Is My Birthday\*](#). Beyond its themes, Ahmed’s show itself exemplifies the community he’s building.

## WHAT, WHEN, WHERE

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*Half Magic*. By Joseph Ahmed, directed by Cat Ramirez. \$5-\$50 on a sliding scale; \$25 suggested. Through September 23, 2023, at Fidget Space, 1714 N Mascher Street, Philadelphia. (215) 413-1318 or [phillyfringe.org](http://phillyfringe.org).

## ACCESSIBILITY

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Fidget Space is accessible only by stairs.

Masks are required.

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