

A POETIC CIRCUS EXTRAVAGANZA

RUMIX'7

TALES FROM THE MASNAVI

A STUDY GUIDE

DIRECTED BY HAFIZ KARMALI



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*“Listen to the song of the reed,
How it wails with the pain of separation:*

*Ever since I was taken from my reed bed
My woeful song has caused men and women to weep.*

*I seek out those whose hearts are torn by separation
For only they understand the pain of this longing.*

*Whoever is taken away from his homeland
Yearns for the day he will return.”*

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RUMI x 7 = TALES FROM THE MASNAVI, translated by A.J. Arberry.

ABOUT THE PLAY

RUMI x 7 = TALES FROM THE MASNAVI is the first play in a new series, **ISLAM 101**, designed to educate the public about Islam through theatre. Through seven vignettes that fuse classical Persian poetry with a dazzling panorama of circus arts and commedia dell arte, Rumi's timeless tales explore the ties that bind human kind to the natural world, to their dreams and to their infinite potential.

RUMI'S MASNAVI is widely recognized as one of the greatest collections of Sufi poetry ever written and is revered throughout the Middle East and around the world as the Qur'an in Persian. The thirteenth-century Sufi poet Jalal al-din Rumi composed this edifying work for the benefit of his students in the order named after him, popularly known as the whirling dervishes. In order to convey his message of divine love and unity he threaded together entertaining stories and allegorical homilies. Drawing from folk tales as well as sacred history, Rumi's poetry is often comic as well as spiritually profound. The *Masnavi* was composed during the final years of Rumi's life. He began dictating the first book around the age of 54 circa 1258 and continued composing verses until his death in 1273. The sixth and final book would remain incomplete.



Ms. 1322
Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi, *Masnavi*, Iran, 1479

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

Hafiz Karmali has a special interest in cross-cultural performances with a view to showcasing indigenous performing arts of the Islamic world. To this end, he has directed *Azaan- A Court Entertainment* in collaboration with performers from Ismaili communities in London and Tajikistan (Guest of Honor: His Highness the Aga Khan); *Rumi x 7 = Tales from the Masnavi* in Uzbekistan; *Water for Life*, in collaboration with a dance company from Gujarat; and with folk artists of Karimabad, Hunza, *Legend of the Baltit Fort*. For Golden Thread Productions, Hafiz has directed *Island of Animals* (2006) an Islamic fable by Muslim scholars known as the Ikhwan al-Safa; ReOrient 2009; the highly acclaimed world premiere of *Night Over Erzinga* (2011) by Adriana Sevahn Nichols as well as Tawfiq al-Hakim's *War & Peace* (ReOrient 2012). Hafiz is finalizing his doctorate thesis on classical Ismaili philosophy.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

SHOPKEEPER AND THE PARROT

A parrot is kept captive in a golden cage by his shopkeeper so that he can attract customers by his beautiful singing. He requests that the shopkeeper give a message to the friends of his youth, with whom he had flown freely in the forest. Upon return, the shopkeeper describes what happened when the free birds hear of their friend's captivity. The bird imitates his friends' actions and gains his own freedom, deceiving his captor.

THIEF AND THE GARDENER

A thief has climbed into an orchard to steal fruit claiming that he is destined by God's will to be a thief and therefore is not responsible for his illegal activity. The gardener convinces him to descend from the tree and proceeds to beat him, claiming that it is God's will that he beat the thief. The thief realizes his mistake and acknowledges that a man sins by his own free will.

MOUSE AND THE CAMEL

A mouse mistakes his powers when he 'leads' a camel by its rope to the edge of a river. The camel sets him straight by explaining that the mouse cannot cross the shallow river on his own, while the camel can. The camel takes the mouse across on his hump while advising the mouse to know the limits of his own power.

AN ELEPHANT IN DARKNESS

An elephant is transported from India to Iran for exhibition. Some curious visitors attempt to take a sneak peek. As the object is not clearly visible, the visitors try to guess what it is by touch. Each reaches a different conclusion. In darkness (ignorance), none are able to correctly describe the object, but each nevertheless stubbornly believes he must have the correct answer. It is only with full knowledge (light) that we are able to reach the truth.

SCHOLAR AND THE BOATMAN

A scholar, who prides himself on his education, dismisses the life of the uneducated boatman rowing him across a river. When the boat is suddenly caught up in a whirlpool, the boatman points out that the scholar's inability to swim renders the scholar's learning useless in this case. Man needs both practical and theoretical knowledge.

SOLOMON AND THE ANGEL OF DEATH

A nobleman asks for King Solomon's help in escaping the angel of death by commanding the wind to carry him to another country. The next day, Solomon learns that the angel had been instructed by God to take the nobleman's spirit in that same distant country. No one escapes death; we are all destined to die.

MOSES AND THE SHEPHERD

Moses rebukes a shepherd for praying to God in a way that the prophet believes is incorrect, much too familiar and intimate. A voice from heaven, presumably God's, chides Moses, telling him that He is not concerned with how men show him devotion, only that they do so with a true heart.

RUMI'S FUNERAL POEM

On the day I die, as my casket is being carried away,
don't think it pains me to leave this world.

Don't weep for me; don't wail. Alas!
Don't fall into the devil's snare, that would be sad indeed.

PERFORMANCE STYLES

There are many performance styles throughout *RUMI X 7*

MIME, or performance without speech, is a very old tradition often found in many cultures. **CIRCUS** clowns are the most familiar manifestation of this tradition, with their white make-up and extravagant costumes. The famous French mime, Marcel Marceau, created unforgettable characters whose slightest movement could inform an entire tragic or comic scene with pathos or hilarity. As in *Commedia*, clowns and mimes rely on stock characters caught up in predictable dilemmas and will often utilize exaggerated physical comedy to evoke laughter from their audiences.

COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE, the most notable of performance styles in the production, originated in Italy in the 16th century and was performed by traveling troupes of professional players (*comici*). The comic plays featured stock characters whose exploits followed predictable patterns (not unlike contemporary sitcoms) and were enlivened by music, dance, witty wordplay and physical comedy. Staging was minimal - portable props and costumes established the scene.

Similar to *Commedia* in Italy, Middle Eastern popular performance traditions, such as *Ruhozi* (Iran) and *Karagoz* (Turkey) involve stock characters as well, and local audiences would recognize such figures as the Shopkeeper, the Thief, and the Scholar immediately. Tales of these characters are found in stories from all around the region.

TRADITIONAL STORYTELLING continues to be an important popular performance style in the Middle East, particularly in Egypt and the Levant [Mediterranean lands]. In many old traditions storytelling is synonymous with song, chant, music, or epic poetry. Stories may be chanted or sung, along with musical accompaniment on a particular instrument. The storytellers and musicians often functioned as historians, healers, and tradition-bearers.

There are various storytelling traditions found throughout the Middle East:

“Hekawati,” an Arab tradition of oral storytelling, narrates adventurous legends, fables and tales of kings and warriors. This narrative style darts in and out of stories like an intricate and complex weaving pattern where the storyteller begins one tale, leaves it mid-way to pick up another and then has a third story emerging from a subplot of the first and so on. All this is done using the tools of allegory, folklore, satire, music and a visual spectacle of grand gestures and facial expressions to finally create an enthralling experience for listeners.

“Mareke giri” is a kind of public traditional street performance in Iran, often featuring such feats by the performer as breaking chains with arms, breaking stones and playing with snakes.

“Naghali” is a story narrated in prose with special tones, feelings and expression. A “naghal” (storyteller), plays the roles of all the different characters and usually narrates epics and mythical stories in coffee houses.

“Dastans” are epic singers from northern Khorasan, (east of Iran,) who narrate and sing stories in Turkish accompanying themselves on the “dotar” (long-necked two-stringed lute); they may also sing in Kurdish about the historical deeds of local figures.

The “Bakhshi” are singers who use a fiddle or lute as accompaniment, and perform tales that may be told over several nights. They are akin to shamans, as they use the recitation of these tales as a conduit to the Spirit world.

In Turkey, a very old folk tradition that thrives to this day is “ozan,” the music of the folk-poets of Anatolia, who are usually referred to as “ashiks,” meaning 'the ones in love' [with the Divine]. The “ashiks” put music to the words of legendary poets and accompany themselves on the “saz,” a long-necked lute, with three sets of strings, said to represent the fundamental trinity of the Muslim faith: Allah, Mohammed and Ali.

ABOUT WHIRLING DERVISHES

Rumi is often associated with the sect of Sufi Islam known as the Whirling Dervishes.



Inspired by his recollection of his beloved teacher, Shams, Rumi originated the practice of dancing in circles while praying and reciting poetry, as he believed passionately in the use of music, poetry and dance as a path for reaching God. For Rumi, music helped devotees to focus their whole being on the divine and to do this so intensely that the soul was both destroyed and resurrected. It was from these ideas that the practice of Whirling Dervishes developed into a ritual form.

"When whirling dervishes turn in circles, they are in a state of prayer... They turn in a way that will make the Light of God descend to the earth. They believe that divine light comes through the right hand when it's turned upward. The left hand brings the light down into the world." The dervishes wear black robes, which they "throw off...as if they are releasing the things on earth that

keep them from God. Underneath their cloaks are dazzling white gowns which stand for divine light." (Demi, 30)

Other religious traditions similarly involve a physical response to deep spiritual engagement. Some include Shakers, Quakers, Christian sects that include snake handling, gospel singing and praise worship in their service, Jewish davening, African and Native American religious dance, and the Hawaiian hula.

ABOUT THE POET, MOWLANA JALALUDDIN RUMI



Rumi was a 13th century Persian Muslim poet, theologian and Sufi mystic, and is considered one of the greatest poets and spiritual masters of all time. He was the founder of the Mevlevi Sufi order, a leading mystical brotherhood of Islam, and his *Masnavi* is considered one of the greatest literary glories of Persia. His poems have been widely translated into many of the world's languages and their importance is considered to go beyond national and ethnic borders.

Rumi was born in 1207 in Balkh, a historical province that is now part of modern Afghanistan, to a family of learned theologians. Escaping the Mongol invasion, Rumi and his family traveled extensively throughout the Middle East, performed pilgrimage to Mecca and finally settled in Konya, Turkey.

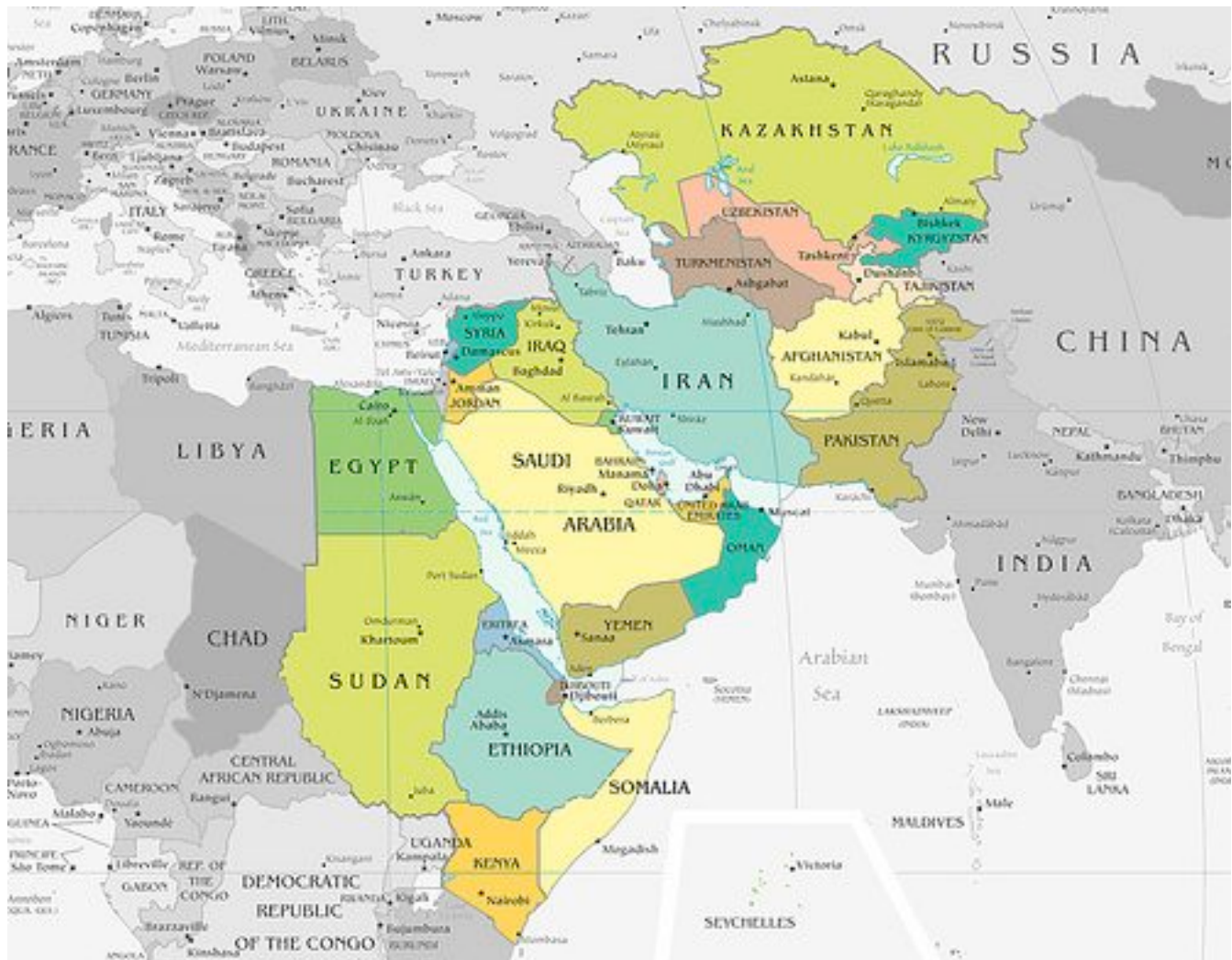
When his father Bahaduddin Valad passed away, Rumi inherited his position as the Islamic molvi.[teacher] At 24 years old, Rumi was an accomplished scholar in religious philosophy. For nine years, Rumi practiced Sufism, and then he became a public figure serving as an Islamic teacher and giving sermons in the mosques of Konya.

In 1244, he met and practiced with the dervish, Shams-e Tabrizi, who changed his life. From an accomplished teacher and jurist, Rumi transformed into an ascetic. Shams mysteriously died, and in mourning his death, Rumi began writing lyric poems. It is then that Rumi spent the next twelve years of his life in Anatolia dictating the six volumes of this masterwork, the *Masnavi*.

The *Masnavi* weaves fables, scenes from everyday life, Qur'anic revelations and metaphysics into a vast and intricate tapestry. The general theme throughout (similar to other mystic and Sufi poets of Persian literature), is the concept of "tawhid"- the longing and desire to restore a union between him and his separated beloved.

Following his death, in December 1273, his followers and his son founded the Mevlevi Order, also known as the Order of the Whirling Dervishes, famous for its Sufi dance. Each year the Mevlevi Dervishes host a festival in Konya marking the anniversary of Rumi's death.

MAP OF THE MIDDLE EAST



QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

FOLLOW UP ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION

Discussion Questions after the performance:

1. What are some of the themes Rumi speaks about in his poems? What does this tell you about Rumi's beliefs/ worldview? What does the poem spoken at Rumi's funeral tell you about Rumi's beliefs about the afterlife?
2. How is 'seeing' poetry different from reading it? What surprised you in watching Rumi's poems come to life?
3. Have you ever heard about the Whirling Dervishes, the Sufi mystical dancers who spin around as they pray? When you watched the spinning, did it remind you of any other religions who share attributes to this practice of moving in devotion?
4. What role, if any, does playfulness have in Rumi's poetry? Has this performance changed your thinking about Islam or about any of the themes presented?
5. Are there any other stories or folktales that remind you of Rumi's?

Class Activity:

Have your class read Rumi's poem, "Song of the Reed." This poem opens the *Masnavi*.

*Listen to the song of the reed,
How it wails with the pain of separation:*

*Ever since I was taken from my reed bed
My woeful song has caused men and women to weep.
I seek out those whose hearts are torn by separation
For only they understand the pain of this longing.
Whoever is taken away from his homeland
Yearns for the day he will return.
In every gathering, among those who are happy or sad,
I cry with the same lament.
Everyone hears according to his own understanding,
None has searched for the secrets within me.
My secret is found in my lament
But an eye or ear without light cannot know it..*

*The sound of the reed comes from fire, not wind
What use is one's life without this fire?
It is the fire of love that brings music to the reed.
It is the ferment of love that gives taste to the wine.
The song of the reed soothes the pain of lost love.
Its melody sweeps the veils from the heart.
Can there be a poison so bitter or a sugar so sweet
As the song of the reed?
To hear the song of the reed
everything you have ever known must be left behind.*

Discussion Questions:

1. Imagery uses language to create sensations—write down the images that stick with you, as you read this poem. What pictures were created in the story? What sounds do you remember? How did it make you feel?
2. In this poem, Rumi talks about separation from his homeland. Have you ever been far away from your home before or felt such separation? What made you feel better?
3. The reed or 'ney' is a popular Middle Eastern musical instrument, which traditionally connotes melancholy and sadness when it is used. Can you think of other specific instruments- what feelings do they induce for you?

Class Activity:

Have your class read Rumi's story, "An Elephant in Darkness"

*Some Hindus have an elephant to show.
No one here has ever seen an elephant.
They bring it at night to a dark room.*

*One by one, we go in the dark and come out
saying how we experience the animal.
One of us happens to touch the trunk.
A water-pipe kind of creature.*

*Another, the ear. A very strong, always moving
back and forth, fan-animal. Another, the leg.
I find it still, like a column on a temple.*

*Another touches the curved back.
A leathery throne. Another the cleverest,
feels the tusk. A rounded sword made of porcelain.
He is proud of his description.*

*Each of us touches one place
and understands the whole that way.
The palm and the fingers feeling in the dark
are how the senses explore the reality of the elephant.*

*If each of us held a candle there,
and if we went in together, we could see it.*

Discussion Questions:

1. Middle Eastern storytellers often communicate in symbols. How does Rumi use an animal (in this case an elephant) to talk about his worldview? What does the elephant symbolize?
2. What is the difference between “seeing” with the hands vs “seeing” with the eyes?
3. What difficulties arise when knowledge about a subject is incomplete or when incorrect conclusions are drawn that lead to conflict? How might this ‘fragmented knowledge’ be similar to the way we understand the Middle East? Different religions? Different political views? Where have you seen this occur?

Class Activity:

We can use animals to get us out of our ‘human world’ and still write about something meaningful in our lives. Use an elephant or a favorite animal, and write a short allegorical story that ends with a moral.

TEACHER RESOURCES

BOOKS

Demi. *Rumi: Whirling Dervish*. Marshall Cavendish Children, Tarrytown NY, 2009.
(Written for upper elementary and middle school children)

Friedlander, Shems. *Rumi and the Whirling Dervishes*. Morning Light Press, 2003.
(Extensive bibliography and glossary)

Gamard, Ibrahim, trans. *Rumi and Islam: Selections from His Stories, Poems, and Discourses*. Skylight
Paths Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2004.

FILMS

Rumi: Poet of the Heart. DVD. Narrated by Debra Winger. Magnolia Films, 2004.

Rumi: Turning Ecstatic. DVD. Choices Studio. 2007

Islamic Mysticism: The Sufi Way. DVD. Hartley Film Foundation, 2009.

WEB SITES

www.dar-al-masnavi.org - full text of Masnavi; background materials

www.rumiforum.org - interfaith initiatives, peace-building

www.rumionfire.com - variety of translations, poems, images

ABOUT GOLDEN THREAD PRODUCTIONS

Golden Thread Productions

Founded in 1996, Golden Thread Productions is dedicated to exploring Middle Eastern cultures and identities as expressed around the globe. We present alternative perspectives of the Middle East by developing and producing theatrical work that is aesthetically varied and politically and viscerally engaging, while supporting countless Middle Eastern artists in all phases of their careers. Our mission is to make the Middle East a potent presence on the American stage and also to make theatre a treasured cultural experience within Middle Eastern communities. We build cultural bridges by engaging the community in an active dialogue and facilitating collaborations among artists of diverse backgrounds with the aim of creating a world where the common human experience supersedes cultural and political differences.

Education at Golden Thread Productions

By providing theatre education rooted in Middle Eastern arts and literature, Golden Thread's Education Program addresses the parallel needs of Middle Eastern youth and families for self-affirming performing arts programming as well as the broad community's need for a deeper understanding of the richness of Middle Eastern arts. Additionally, the program equips arts educators with much needed overview of the region and its culture. Golden Thread's multifaceted Education Program has the following main elements:

Theatre Curriculum inspired by Middle Eastern Arts & Literature: An innovative theatre education curriculum rooted in Middle Eastern arts and literature with training programs for teaching artists focused on Middle Eastern history, arts and literature taught by university professors and master artists.

Teaching Residencies: Theatre classes and workshops that use both traditional and contemporary Middle Eastern literature and the arts as resource to lead classes in performance skills and writing at host schools and cultural organizations. Class content and activities are informed by the teachers' own diverse immigrant background and facilitated by multi-lingual skills.

The Fairytale Players: Inspired by popular performance traditions in the Middle East the Fairytale Players employ epic story-telling, physical theatre and circus arts techniques in creating performances based on stories from the Middle East.

Student Matinee Performances of Main Stage Productions: To enrich students' understanding of main stage productions, Golden Thread offers special matinee performances supported by study guides that connect various aspects of the play to elements of California Education Standards. Study guides contain detailed information about each play, giving historical, cultural, geographical background, as well as pre- and post- show activities to deepen the audience's understanding of the play.

For more information on partnering with our Education Programs, please email education@goldenthread.org.

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