



Hello,

Thank you for your interest in the ReOrient 2012 Festival and Forum. In this packet you will find many items of interest for feature articles and other promotional opportunities.

Table of Contents

ReOrient 2012 Festival & Forum Press Release.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
ReOrient Festival Schedule.....	5
Series A: November 1–18, 2012 at Noh Space	5
Series B: November 16 & 17 at Z Space.....	6
ReOrient 2012 Festival Biographies	7
ReOrient Forum Schedule	10
Keynote Address and Panels	10
Special Presentations	14
Forum Participant Biographies.....	16
Past Press.....	26

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We Look forward to your involvement in ReOrient Theatre Festival and Forum.

Truly Yours,

The Golden Thread Team



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ReOrient 2012

Golden Thread's Signature Event Returns Nov. 1–18

ReOrient Theatre Festival and Forum Exploring the Middle East features
10 fully-produced works by writers such as
MacArthur "Genius" Award winner Naomi Wallace,
2012 Steinberg Best New Play Award winner Yussef El Guindi,
and foremost Egyptian playwright Tawfiq Al-Hakim.

ReOrient Forum (Nov. 17-18) includes panel discussions, readings
and special presentations featuring international artists, activists and scholars.

Columbia University's Hamid Dabashi, internationally renowned cultural critic and
award-winning author, announced as keynote speaker for the ReOrient Forum.

"At a time when the Middle East dominates the headlines, ReOrient aspires to forge clarity out of chaos. This timely festival incites us to look past the 24/7 media blitz to see the cycles of tragedy." —SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

(San Francisco) August 17, 2012—Featuring voices from Iraq, Iran, Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, England, and the U.S., Golden Thread's **ReOrient 2012 Festival and Forum** once again promises to turn San Francisco into a Mecca for innovative, spirited, and thought-provoking theatre from and about the Middle East. The ReOrient 2012 plays are diverse in style and content from writers with remarkably different backgrounds. The playwrights include MacArthur "Genius" Award winner **Naomi Wallace**, Middle East America Award winner and recipient of 2012 Steinberg/American Theatre Critics Circle Best New Play Award **Yussef El Guindi**, leading modernist Egyptian playwright **Tawfiq Al-Hakim**, winner of the William Saroyan Prize **Silva Semerciyan**, and local writers **E.H. Benedict** and **Farzam Farrokhi**. ReOrient 2012 performs in two series: **Series A runs November 1-18, 2012, at Noh Space** (2840 Mariposa St., San Francisco) and **Series B runs for only two special performances November 16 and 17, 2012, at Z Space** (450 Florida Street, San Francisco). Tickets for the festival are \$20 (discounts available) and can be purchased at goldenthread.org.

"ReOrient proposes a conversation among the plays, and with the audience. This year's lineup questions conventional notions of identity, conflict, and even peace," Golden Thread

Founding Artistic Director Torange Yeghiazarian explains. “ReOrient is the only place you can encounter the diversity and richness of the Middle Eastern experience and the many ways the United States is an integral part of it.”

Over its past 10 incarnations, the ReOrient Festival has emerged as a unique and much-needed medium to facilitate an exchange with the Middle East. San Francisco Bay Guardian has said about the festival: “The annual cavalcade of short plays about the Middle East that has itself provided, in addition to a dependable variety of aesthetic pleasures, crucial space for public consideration and dialogue.”

Following its successful launch in 2009, **ReOrient Forum**—a special weekend of artistic conversation, networking and exchange—also returns **November 17–18, 2012, at Z Space** (450 Florida Street, San Francisco). Acclaimed author and distinguished scholar of Middle Eastern studies and comparative literature, Professor **Hamid Dabashi** of Columbia University will kick off the Forum with a keynote address. This year’s Forum features provocative panel discussions on topics such as “The Arab Spring and Its Dramatic Reverberations,” “Engaged Performance: Building Dialogue Through Artistic Exchange,” “From ‘War on Drugs’ to ‘War on Terror’: Parallels in Latino/Chicano and Middle Eastern American Performance,” and “Comedic Counter Terrorism.” Performances include a staged reading of **Yussef El Guindi’s MUMMY AND THE REVOLUTION**, the winner of the current Middle East America Award, and the Golden Thread Fairytale Players production of **RUMI x 7 = TALES FROM THE MANAVI directed by Hafiz Karmali**, a family friendly circus extravaganza based on the poetry of the universal Sufi poet Rumi. ReOrient Theatre Festival and Forum will close with a special concert by Bay Area saxophonist **Hafez Modirzadeh and Friends**, followed by a reception. Panels and the staged reading are free and open to the public. Tickets are \$20 (discounts available) for RUMI x 7 = TALES FROM THE MASNAVI and \$30 (discounts available) for the Closing Concert (discounts available) and can be purchased at goldenthread.org.

“As the Middle East goes through sweeping changes, we hunger for deeper understanding of the driving forces and how theatre informs and reflects the process,” explains Torange Yeghiazarian. “The Forum is an opportunity to hear directly from Middle Eastern artists about their recent experiences, as well as explore unexpected bonds and shared strategies.” ReOrient Forum panel discussions and presentations will be live-streamed on #NewPlay TV, a program of Center for the Theater Commons / HowlRound.com. On Saturday, November 17, Series B performances will be followed by a Q&A session with featured playwrights from Iran and Iraq via the internet. As part of Golden Thread’s thriving educational program, ReOrient 2012 will feature two student outreach performances of Series A on November 9 and 16 at Noh Space, and of RUMI x 7 = TALES FROM THE MASNAVI on November 15 at Z Space. In addition, a ReOrient play contest for high school students is conducted; three winners will receive staged readings during the Forum.

ReOrient Forum is presented in partnership with Theatre Bay Area, Z Space, Playwrights Foundation, Theatre Without Borders, Theatre Communications Group, Lark Play Development Center, Silk Road Rising, freeDimensional, Hybrid Theatre Works, University of San Francisco Performance and Social Justice Department, and UC Berkeley Center for Middle Eastern Studies.

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.

ReOrient Festival Schedule

Series A: November 1–18, 2012 at Noh Space

Thursdays–Saturdays at 8pm; Sundays at 7pm

WAR AND PEACE

by Tawfiq Al-Hakim, translated by May Jayyusi and David Wright, directed by Hafiz Karmali

Meet Politica, a vivacious woman, who must choose between her domineering husband War and oft-disappointing lover Peace. Funny and subtle, this symbolic play by Egypt's foremost playwright could keep a senior seminar in a political science department busy for weeks.

THE BIRDS FLEW IN (World Premiere)

by Yussef El Guindi, directed by Evren Odcikin

The mother of a dead soldier cannot reconcile her conflicted feelings about the Iraqi War. El Guindi, the 2011 winner of the prestigious Middle East America Award, paints a tender and complicated portrait of the ultimate pain of losing a child.

THE LETTER (World Premiere)

by Mona Mansour and Tala Manassah, directed by Sara Razavi

In 2011, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Tony Kushner was blocked from receiving an honorary degree from CUNY for his criticism of Israel. Palestinian-American physicist Kamal and his philosopher daughter Alia take their outrage to the stage, but, first, can they really prove that they are human?

STALEMATE (World Premiere)

by Silva Semerciyan, directed by Desdemona Chiang

At a hi-fi shop and a disco in London and a war field in Iraq, the inherent racism and sexism of the bravura male culture is brilliantly skewered in this funny and hard-hitting play by the William Saroyan Prize winner Silva Semerciyan.

IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOW (World Premiere)

by Jen Silverman, directed by Christine Young

In this poignant play by up-and-coming writer Jen Silverman, former Israeli soldier Orh follows Lebanese poet Iman to the United States mesmerized by the haunting beauty of her poetry. Can their mutual love of words heal the personal and political wounds they carry?

2012 (World Premiere)

by Farzam Farrokhi, directed by Sara Razavi

Three strangers on cell phones walk into a café. It might sound like a joke, but this could be the end of the world. Introducing local playwright Farzam Farrokhi.

Series B: November 16 & 17 at Z Space

Friday and Saturday at 8pm

CITY OF GRUBS (U.S. premiere)

by Naomi Wallace, directed by Desdemona Chiang

An Arab Jewish immigrant finds a dead man in the seedy hotel he cleans in Camden, NJ, and tells the body of this stranger his deepest secrets. The MacArthur “Genius” Award winner Naomi Wallace returns to the ReOrient Festival for the fourth time with this brilliant monologue.

ORHAN (World Premiere)

by E.H. Benedict, directed by Evren Odcikin

Young British man Orhan, half Turkish and half black, finds himself incarcerated as a terrorist for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Local writer Elizabeth Benedict explores the deep-rooted complications of being mixed race in a culture that defines everything as us against them.

STUCK (World Premiere)

by Amir al-Azraqi, directed by Torange Yeghiazarian

What does it take to get out of Iraq with a Iraqi passport? Iraqi playwright Amir al-Azraqi takes us on the absurd journey of visas, rejections, and searches that most Middle Easterners experience at airports with this tour-de-force play with movement.

THE VOICE ROOM (World Premiere)

by Reza Soroosh, translated and directed by Torange Yeghiazarian

A novice secret agent is eager to prove himself when he is assigned to spy on an underground rebel guerilla team led by Qobad, a high-valued prisoner. As this taut spy thriller unravels, will he be able to hold onto his skin against all odds?

ReOrient 2012 Festival Biographies

Amir Al-Azraki (playwright) is a lecturer of English drama at the University of Basra. He received his BA in English from the University of Basra, his MA in English literature from Baghdad University, and his PhD in Theatre Studies from York University in Toronto, Canada. In the last four years Al-Azraki has been working on his dissertation "The Representation of Political Violence in Contemporary English and Arabic Plays About Iraq", and continued to develop a collaboration between the University of Basra and the Central School of Speech and Drama in the University of London on "Transforming the Learning Environment Through Forum Theatre: Developing a Basra University Model." Al-Azraki is also a performer and playwright and he has presented papers at F.O.O.T., Performing Back: A Conference on Post-Colonial Theatre, and at TCG National Conference. Among his plays are WAITING FOR GILGAMESH: SCENES FROM IRAQ, STUCK, NOTORIOUS WOMEN, LYSISTRATA IN IRAQ, and JUDGMENT DAY.

E. H. Benedict (playwright) is an actor, novelist, and most recently, playwright, is delighted to be working with Golden Thread. She is a founding member of Actors & Writers, a reader's theatre near Woodstock, New York, where many of her short plays and screenplays are read. In 2005 her play Jesus in Las Vegas was included in the Bash! Event at the Bay Area Playwrights Festival. In 2006 JESUS IN LAS VEGAS was included in the Z/Magic Monday series at Magic Theatre. That same year, ORHAN was included as a staged reading in the 2006 ReOrient Festival for the first time. Another play, AMERICAN ROYALS, was selected as a semifinalist for the 2008 O'Neill Conference, the Utah Shakespearean Festival's New American Playwrights Project, and Pacific Rep's Hyperion New Plays Competition. In 2009 AMERICAN ROYALS received a round-table read at the Lark Play Development Center in New York City.

Yussef El Guindi's (playwright) most recent productions include PILGRIMS MUSA and SHERI IN THE NEW WORLD (winner of the Steinberg/ American Theater Critics Association's New Play Award in 2012; Gregory Award 2011; Seattle Times' "Footlight Award" for Best World Premiere Play, 2011) at ACT, and LANGUAGE ROOMS (Edgerton Foundation New American Play Award, as well as ACT's New Play Award), co-produced by the Asian American Theater Company and Golden Thread Productions in San Francisco; at the Wilma Theater in Philadelphia (premiere), and at the Los Angeles Theater Center, where it was co-produced by Golden Thread Productions and the Latino Theater Company. His plays, BACK OF THE THROAT, as well as SUCH A BEAUTIFUL VOICE IS SAYEDA'S AND KARIMA'S CITY, have been published by Dramatists Play Service. The latter one-acts have also been included in The Best American Short Plays: 2004-2005, published by Applause Books in 2008. His play TEN ACROBATS in an Amazing Leap of Faith is included in Salaam/Peace: An Anthology of Middle Eastern American Playwrights, published by TCG, 2009.

Born in Tehran, Iran, **Farzam Farrokhi** (playwright) migrated to Kalamazoo, Michigan in 1984 to continue his high school and college education. He obtained a Master's degree in computer science, and a minor in mathematics and religion, before moving to the Bay Area

in 1995. He has been a long time film and theatre enthusiast and his short play 2012 is his first submission to a theatre company.

After pursuing his MFA (Directing) at Carnegie-Mellon University School of Drama, **Hafiz Karmali** (director) participated in an apprenticeship at the American Repertory Theatre (ART) at Harvard where he assisted internationally renowned directors Robert Wilson and Andrei Serban. While at the ART, he was a Teaching Fellow in the English Department at Harvard University for courses taught by Professor Robert Brustein. Most recently, Hafiz remounted his favorite Sufi poem CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS by Farid uddin Attar in Vancouver. Hafiz has directed RUMI x 7 = TALES FROM THE MASNAVI in circus style at Golden Thread Productions, San Francisco (2011). As a special event to commemorate Prince Karim Aga Khan's golden jubilee as spiritual leader, Hafiz co-wrote and directed an international touring theatre production, ALI TO KARIM—A TRIBUTE TO THE ISMAILI IMAMS (London 2008). Mr. Karmali has a special interest in crosscultural performances, showcasing indigenous performing arts of the Islamic world.

Tala Jamal Manassah (playwright) is the deputy executive director of the Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility. From 2004–2009, Manassah served as the founding executive director of the Middle East Children's Institute. Manassah earned her A.B. with honors in philosophy and A.M. in the humanities at the University of Chicago. Plays include THE HOUSE, which was commissioned by Noor Theater and the American Institute for Architecture and read as part of their Building A New series, and AFTER, which will be produced at CUNY next spring, both cowritten with Mona Mansour.

Mona Mansour's (playwright) play THE HOUR OF FEELING (directed by Mark Wing-Davey) just received its world premiere in the Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Following that, it was part of the High Tide Festival in the U.K. as part of the Rifle Hall plays. The companion play URGE FOR GOING (directed by Hal Brooks) received a LAB production in the 2011 season at the Public Theater. Mona was a member of the Public Theater's Emerging Writers Group, and is currently a Core Writer at Minneapolis' Playwrights Center. Other plays include ACROSS THE WATER and BROADCAST YOURSELF (part of Headlong's Decade, which premiered in London). Her play THE WAY WEST, about modern-day California, will receive a BareBones workshop production at the Lark in November. Her work has been developed at Williamstown Theater Festival, New York Stage and Film, and Lincoln Center Directors' Lab. Television credits include DEAD LIKE ME and QUEENS SUPREME. Honorable mention, 2010 Middle East America Playwright Award.

Evren Odcikin (director) is the literary artistic associate with Golden Thread and has assisted in producing the ReOrient Festival. His directing credits include INVASION! with Crowded Fire; LANGUAGE ROOMS with Golden Thread, which was remounted at Los Angeles Theater Center and selected as a Los Angeles Times critic's pick; THE OLDEST PROFESSION AND MACHINAL (three Bay Area Theatre Critics' Circle Award nominations including best director and best production) at Brava Theater Center; and RHINO with Boxcar Theatre ("Most Inventive Staging of 2010" from SF Weekly, "Best Play of 2010" from SF Bay Times). Evren was born and raised in Turkey and is a graduate of Princeton University.

Sara Razavi (director) is a regular performer at Golden Thread and other Bay Area theatres. She is a founding member of elastic future, an experimental arts group working in live performance, and has collaborated on several ensemble-generated works. Her directing debut with Maryam Rostami's one-woman show, PERSEPOLIS, TEXAS for CounterPULSE Theatre's Summer Special, was followed shortly after with Denmo Ibrahim's one-woman show, BABA, for the Minneapolis Fringe Festival. In addition to theatre work, Razavi has led and managed several socially responsible entities, and is currently pursuing an MBA. She happily wears her artistic and management hat as a member of Golden Thread's Board of Trustees.

Silva Semerciyan (playwright) was born in Michigan and moved to the UK in 1999. Her plays include ANOTHER MAN'S SON (winner of the 2010 William Saroyan Award for Playwriting and currently in development at the UK's National Theatre Studio), GATHER YE ROSEBUDS (winner of the 2012 Sandpit Arts Bulbul Competition), I and the Village (shortlisted for the Bruntwood Prize for Playwriting) and DEATH ROW GOURMET (shortlisted for the Seven Devils Conference in Idaho). This summer, her short play, JUKE, was produced by Eyebrow Productions as part of Collision for Latitude Festival and Bestival. She is a member of the Conspirators Theatre Project and is currently part of the Studio Writers' Group at the Royal Court Theatre. She holds a Masters in playwriting from the University of Birmingham.

Jen Silverman (playwright) studied at Brown University and the Iowa Playwrights Workshop. Crane Story premiered off-Broadway in 2011 with The Playwrights Realm, and Akarui premiered at Cleveland Public Theatre in 2012. She is an affiliated artist with New Georges, a member of Youngblood at Ensemble Studio Theatre and Groundbreakers at terraNova (NYC), and has developed work with the Lark, NY Stage & Film, the Bay Area Playwrights Festival, The Brick (Brooklyn), Leviathan Lab (NYC), and the Seven Devils Playwrights Conference. She has been commissioned by InterAct Theatre for THE DANGEROUS HOUSE OF PRETTY MBANE, the Gallatin School/NYU for BONES AT THE GATE: AN ANTIGONE, and Red Fern Theatre Co for LEX BEFORE MARRIAGE. She held residencies at Hedgebrook, New Harmony, MacDowell, the Millay Colony, and Djerassi (upcoming). In 2011 she was a US Delegate for a China/America Writers Exchange in Beijing. Her play STILL won the 2012 Jane Chambers Award.

Naomi Wallace (playwright) was born in Kentucky. Her plays include ONE FLEA SPARE, IN THE HEART OF AMERICA, SLAUGHTER CITY, THE TRESTLE AT POPE LICK CREEK, THINGS OF DRY HOURS, THE FEVER CHART: THREE VISIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST and THE HARD WEATHER BOATING PARTY. Her work has received the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, the Kesselring Prize, the Fellowship of Southern Writers Drama Award, and an Obie. She is also a recipient of the MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship. Wallace is the 2012 winner of the Horton Foote Prize for most promising new American play, The Liquid Plain.

ReOrient Forum Schedule

Saturday, November 17 and Sunday, November 18; 9:00am-6:00pm
Z Space (450 Florida Street, San Francisco, CA)

All panels and readings are free and open to the public. Advanced registration is recommended. To RSVP visit www.goldenthread.org.

Ticketed Performances

RUMI X 7 = TALES FROM THE MASNAVI: \$20 (\$15 for students and seniors, group discounts available)

Closing Night Concert and Reception: \$30 (\$20 for students and seniors)

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

In Our Own Words

Hamid Dabashi, professor of Middle East Studies at Columbia University, discusses the current state of the arts, identity, alterity, and representation in the current climate of change and upheaval.

PANELS

Staging the Middle East

Chair: Brad Erikson, Theatre Bay Area

Panelists: Michael Butler (Center Rep), Carey Perloff (American Conservatory Theater), Sean San Jose (Campo Santo/Intersection), Marissa Wolf (Crowded Fire)

Sponsor: Theatre Bay Area

Bay Area theatre companies discuss the distinct challenges and rewards of staging plays about the Middle East. More plays about the Middle East have been produced in the US in recent years than ever before. Theatre Bay Area asks artistic directors of four diverse San Francisco theatre companies with recent productions about or from the Middle East to reflect upon the challenges and rewards of that experience. What was their impetus for the production? How did they manage casting, dramaturgy, and audience outreach? How did they prepare audiences to receive the work? What was the response to the production? What might help spark further reflection, conversation, and action?

The Arab Spring and Its Dramatic Reverberations

Chairs: JJ El-Far & Tracy Cameron Francis, Hybrid Theater Works

Panelists: Jay Abdo (actor, Syria), Nasreddine Ben Maati (Tunisia, via Skype), Hadia Mousa (visiting scholar at NYU, Egypt), Naghmeh Samini (playwright and critic, Iran)

Sponsor: Hybrid Theatre Works

Hybrid Theatre Works brings together artists from the Arab World and Iran to reflect upon the socio-political transformation initiated by the current events in the Middle East. The discussion will consider how the “Arab Spring” has changed the landscape for artistic practice as well as what, if any, “revolutionary” aesthetics emerged among Middle East and

Arab-American artists both within theater and cross-disciplinary work. Panelists will discuss the role of social media and global audience vis-à-vis local censorship and limitations to Internet access and will further address how performances both at the street level and in professional theatres contributed to and were informed by the uprisings. Panelists will reflect upon what they specifically see as the role of theater artists in shaping a new cultural identity in the wake of political change.

Engaged Performance: Building Dialogue Through Intercultural Artistic Exchange

Chair: Laura Hope, Assistant Professor of Theatre and faculty member for the minor in Middle East Peace Studies at Loyola University New Orleans

Panelists: Gülgün Kayim & Calling Shift collaboration, Philip Kan Gotanda (playwright), Roberta Levitow (Theatre Without Borders), Andrew Wood (San Francisco International Art Festival)

Sponsor: Theatre Without Borders

Artists, producers, and presenters discuss ways in which making theatre serves as a means to restoring social relationships affected by political trauma. Making theatre requires a high level of dialogue and collaboration, making it uniquely suited for bringing together diverse, even opposing, narratives and perspectives. Thus, theatre-making offers the potential for engaging and healing communities that have experienced various forms of political and social traumas such as war, racism, and displacement. This panel will feature a diverse range of panelists who will consider how artists work through these traumas in order to engage opposing communities and renew community and global relations. The discussion will include such topics as US-Iraq relations since the U.S. “War on Terror” and Greek-Turkish relations in Cyprus. Panelists will reflect upon whether or not the creative process of making theatre can support intercultural exchange, rebuilding fraught relationships, and work as a conduit for healing political and social wounds.

Rapid Response: Protecting Artists Under Threat

Chair: Roberto Varea, Performing Arts and Social Justice Program at University of San Francisco & Theatre Without Borders

Panelists: Sidd Joag (freeDimensional), Nazy Kaviani (writer and artist advocate), Jessica Litwak (Theater Without Borders), William Butkus (Amnesty International)

Sponsor: Theater Without Borders & freeDimensional

Theatre Without Borders and freeDimensional facilitate a discussion about practical guidelines for providing safe house to artists in danger. Artists have historically been among the most vulnerable during political upheaval, particularly since their artistic work gives them an increased visibility. Theatre Without Borders and freeDimensional are two grassroots networks that have initiated a new partnership to help artists under threat globally. Their representatives will join a field organizer from Amnesty International and a local blogger/advocate in order to discuss their experience helping artists in various parts of the world and consider how these protocols can be a model for working with Middle Eastern artists. Inquiring whether or not there can be a universal model for helping artists under threat, panelists will discuss practical guidelines for providing safe house for artists and the need for a nuanced understanding of their complex situations.

From “War on Drugs” to “War on Terror”: Parallels in Latino/Chicano and Middle East American Performance

Chair: Torange Yeghiazarian, Golden Thread Productions

Panelists: Jose Luis Valenzuela (LATC), Angela Marino (UC Berkeley dept. of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies), Octavio Solis (playwright), RobertoVarea (Chair of Center for Latino Studies, University of San Francisco)

Sponsor: Center for Latino Studies, University of San Francisco

Golden Thread Productions invites leaders of Chicano/Latino theatre to explore the shared journey of two communities responding creatively to vilification. During the 1980s, Chicano/Latino communities in the U.S. experienced extreme forms of social ostracism as a result of the civil unrest and political turmoil in Central America. This ostracism was exacerbated by U.S. involvement in the region and the creation of the “War on Drugs,” which militarized the region in attempts to counter socialist forces. Likewise, the decade following the events of 9/11 has witnessed a similar vilification of Middle Eastern and Muslim communities in the U.S. as American forces have militarized the Middle East under the title of “War on Terror.” This panel, led by Golden Thread Productions artistic director, will explore the ways in which Chicano/Latino and Middle Eastern theater artists have responded to these trends and what lies ahead for hyphenated theatre in the US.

Comedic Counter Terrorism

Chair: Joan Holden, playwright

Panelists: Yussef El Guindi (playwright), Sara Felder (theater artist/humorist/juggler), Zahra Noorbakhsh (comedian)

A playwright, a juggler, and a standup comedian walk into a panel... Comedy has long been the social critic’s tool for education and transformation. From Aristophanes to Oscar Wilde to Tawfiq Al Hakim, playwrights have chosen humor and satire to attract and engage audiences when addressing the most serious or sensitive issues. In today’s global reality, no issue is more serious or sensitive than the Middle East. The artists on this panel will share their strategies for combatting the fear and ignorance that continue to surround this heaviest of topics and other thorny subjects like identity, sexuality, religion, and political divisions. The panel will follow the staged reading of Yussef El Guindi’s new play, *THE MUMMY AND THE REVOLUTION*.

Re-Traditioning the Verse: Poetry in Performance

Chair: Haleh Hatami, Golden Thread Productions

Panelists: Amir Baradaran (new media visual artist and performer), Hafiz Karmali (auteur director), Zara Houshmand (poet, translator, director), Torange Yeghiazarian (writer, director)

Artists explore the path to dramatizing poetry, the revered art of the Middle East. Poetry—classical, spiritual, and contemporary—has long been considered among the most revered arts of the Middle East. Incorporating poetry into other art forms can lend instant (and often unwarranted) credibility to a project. At the same time, it can also raise the ire of purists who equate innovations to original poems (even their mere translation) with artistic heresy. Beyond these two extreme challenges, those who venture to integrate original Middle Eastern poetry into contemporary performance face a variety of tasks. Four performance

and theater artists share, discuss, and debate their approach to translation and incorporation of poetry into their respective art practices. Panelist expertise includes: staging Islamic texts and Sufi poetry; staging contemporary Persian poetry; and incorporating classical poetry into new media performance art. The panel will follow featured presentation of Hafiz Karmali's latest work, RUMI X 7 = TALES FROM THE MASNAVI.

SPECIAL PRESENTATIONS

Saturday, November 17, at 2:30pm

THE MUMMY AND THE REVOLUTION by Yussef El Guindi

Middle East America: A National New Plays Initiative (MEA)

Sponsors: Silk Road Rising & Lark Play Development Center

Jamil Khoury, founding artistic director of Silk Road Rising, interviews Yussef El Guindi, the 2011 Middle East America Distinguished Playwright, Yussef El Guindi, followed by a staged reading of his MEA commissioned play. Launched in 2008 by Silk Road Rising, Lark Play Development Center and Golden Thread Productions, the Middle East America National New Plays Initiative (MEA) aims to discover and support the development of Middle Eastern American playwrights and plays of the highest artistic caliber and to enrich the canon of American dramatic literature. The program aims to challenge both the lack of representation and the one-dimensional stereotypical representation of persons of Middle Eastern descent on America's stages.

An Egyptian revolutionary, an American collector, and a reanimated mummy—just three of the characters in this comedic gem from the writer that brought Golden Thread audiences LANGUAGE ROOMS, JIHAD JONES AND THE KALASHNIKOV BABES, and BACK OF THE THROAT. Golden Thread mainstay Yussef El Guindi's unique voice has been nationally recognized with the 2011 Middle East America Award and the 2012 Harold and Mimi Steinberg/American Theatre Critics Circle New Play Award.

Sunday, November 18, at 2:00pm

RUMI x 7 = TALES FROM THE MASNAVI

directed by Hafiz Karmali

This unique and visually engaging family production brings to life the dynamic story-telling traditions of Rumi through a lyrical fusion of circus arts and classical Persian poetry performed by an ensemble of actors, acrobats, dancers and musicians. Drawing from folk tales as well as sacred history, Rumi's poetry is often comic as well as spiritually profound and MASNAVI is widely recognized as his cornerstone work as the most celebrated poet of the Sufi tradition. This play is the first in a new series, Islam 101, designed to educate the public about Islam through theatre.

Tickets for this family-friendly production are \$20 (\$15 for students and seniors, free admission for children under 12)

Sunday, November 18, at 7:00pm

**Closing Night Concert and Reception Featuring
Hafez Modirzadeh and Friends**

Bay Area jazz saxophonist, Hafez Modirzadeh will be joined by longtime collaborators Ramin Zofonoun (Piano) and Jamshid Zarringhalam (percussion) for an unforgettable evening of live music that is sure to "ReOrient" the listener. Tickets for concert and reception are \$30 (\$20 for students and seniors).

For over two decades, Hafez Modirzadeh has developed his pioneering “chromodal” concept, a crosscultural musical approach developed from his own American jazz and Iranian dastgah heritages. He has published extensively on the subject while developing alternative performance techniques to adapt the saxophone to the Persian tuning system.

Forum Participant Biographies

Panel Name Key:

“Keynote Address” – KA

“MEA Presentation” – MEA

“Staging the Middle East” – SME

“Arab Spring & its Dramatic Reverberations” – ASDR

“Engaged Performance: Building US-ME Dialogue through Artistic Exchange” – EP

“Rapid Response: Protecting Artists Under Threat” – RR

“From “War on Drugs” to “War on Terror”: Parallels in Chicano/Latino and Middle East American Performance” – WDWT

“Comedic Counter Terrorism” – CCT

“Re-traditioning the Verse: Persian Poetry in Performance” – RTV

Syrian actor **Jay Abdo (panelist, ASDR)** has performed in television and on stage. He started his acting career on stage in 1984 in Cluj-Napoca Romania, where he was studying civil engineering. His studies also include four years of Drama School in Syria and three years of Spanish at Cervantes Institute. Film: VALLEY OF THE WOLVES (The Kurdish Leader); over 40 films in Syria; REVERED AS THE FATHER (University of Michigan student film). Television: Over 70 serial productions in Syria (Arabic, English and Spanish), including IKHWAT AL-TURAB, BAB AL-HARA, and many others. Theatre: Over 20 plays in Romania and Syria, including ACCIDENTAL DEATH OF AN ANARCHIST (Bertotio) 1992 and DON JUAN (title character) at Damascus National Theater. He also plays violin professionally. Jay is heavily involved with charity work and has done work for children with cancer, Mongolians, and orphans.

Amir Baradaran (panelist, RTV), a New York-based media and performance artist, was born in Tehran and raised in Montreal. Baradaran’s experience in academia and activism launched his artistic practice. Baradaran engages in speculative, participatory public experiences through notions of technology, authorship and identity. Under the title FutARism, he employed Augmented Reality (AR) as an installation medium. Iterations include SAMOVAR & THE TEMPEST IN THE TEAHOUSE (Armory Arts Week, NYC, 2012), GROWING PANES (British Museum, Art & Patronage Summit, London, UK, 2012), and THE BUZZZ (Miami Art Basel, 2011), VENICE AUGMENTED (54th Biennale, Italy, 2011), FRENCHISING MONA LISA (Louvre Museum, Paris, France, 2011), and TAKEOFF (MOMA, NYC, 2010). SIMPLE AS DRINKING WATER, was selected as the winner of 2011 International Symposium on Mixed and

Augmented Reality (ISMAR). Past works include MARRY ME TO THE END OF LOVE (2012); CITÉ INTERNATIONALE DES ARTS OF PARIS; TRANSIENT (2010), and THE OTHER ARTIST IS PRESENT (2010).

After receiving a bachelor's degree, **Nasreddine Ben Maati (panelist, ASDR)** studied to cinema in the Higher Institute of Arts and Multimedia. From the young age 17 years he joined the Tunisian Federation of Filmmakers (FTCA), where he worked as a cameraman and assistant director in shorts amateur and independent films. He has also participated in several workshops supported by the FTCA. Nasreddine worked as assistant director in two short films made by the Tunisian director Bahri Ben Yahmed and worked as a supervisor in the filming of 3D clip of the theater play of Souade Slimene. In September 2010, Nasreddine participated in a writing and production workshop, entitled "Young Seen By Young People" organized by the Ministry of Culture and directed the short film The Corner, which was selected for the 2011 Cannes Film Festival. He also took a documentary writing workshop organized by the French Institute of Cooperation and Francophonie, and after the workshop he completed his documentary GENERATION MAUDITE. Nasreddine is the founder of living art (iche el fane), a Tunisian association, where he shares his experiences with other young artists.

William Butkus (panelist, RR) is the Amnesty International Field Organizer for Alaska, Hawaii, Montana, Nevada and Northern California.

Michael Butler (panelist, SME) is the Artistic Director of Center REP, the resident professional company of the Leshner Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek. His directing work has also been seen in New York (The Public Theatre, The Actors Studio), Los Angeles (The Odyssey), at regional theatres around the country (Seattle Rep, San Jose Rep, Cleveland Playhouse) and at The Juilliard School, of which he is a graduate. He is a published songwriter and the co-writer and composer of numerous music-theatre pieces, which he has directed and performed in NY, LA, and at festivals in India and Morocco. In his career as a performer he has worked on Broadway and off, in film and television, performed with the Erick Hawkins Dance Company, portrayed the villainous Pierre LeChance on THE GUIDING LIGHT, and played guitar and harmonica in many rock, blues, and country western bands at all the notable dives in NYC.

Tracy Cameron Francis (cochair, ASDR) is an Egyptian-American theatre director and artistic director of Hybrid Theatre Works in NYC. She has directed and developed work with Red Bull Theatre, New York Theatre Workshop, Williamstown Theatre Festival, LaMama Umbria (Italy), NY Arab American Comedy Festival, Martin Segal Theatre, Monarch Theatre, NY International Fringe, Falaki Theatre (Egypt), Alwan For the Arts, International Wow, Terra Nova Collective, among others. Francis also creates interdisciplinary performance works collaborating with artists from all over the world, including the Middle East, South America, Asia, and the USA. She has worked as a teaching artist for recent immigrants at the International Center in NYC and has served as a guest director for the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute. A core member of Theatre Without Borders, she earned a B.A. in Middle East Studies and Theatre from Fordham University where she wrote her thesis on political theatre in Egypt.

Hamid Dabashi (keynote speaker) is the Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York, the oldest and most

prestigious chair in his field. He is a founding member of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society, as well as a founding member of the Center for Palestine Studies at Columbia University. In the context of his commitment to advancing transnational art and independent world cinema, Hamid Dabashi is the founder of Dreams of a Nation, a Palestinian Film Project, dedicated to preserving and safeguarding Palestinian Cinema. He is also chiefly responsible for opening up the study of Persian literature and Iranian culture at Columbia University to students of comparative literature and society. A committed teacher in the past three decades, Hamid Dabashi lives in New York with his wife and colleague, the Iranian-Swedish feminist, Golbarg Bashi.

JJ El-Far (cochair, ASDR) is an Arab-American producer, director, and interdisciplinary artist based in Harlem, New York. J.J. holds a B.A. from Brandeis University in Theater Arts and International Global Studies. She is the founding executive director of Hybrid Theatre Works and the founding creative director of the multi-disciplinary Harlem Arts Festival. She is a core team member of Theatre Without Borders. J.J. is the theater critic for UPTOWN FLAVOR and has worked with Ted X Harlem, LaGuardia Performing Arts Center, the NY Arab American Comedy Fest, Planet Connections Theatre Festivity, Berkshire Theatre Festival, and the Jerash Festival of Arts and Culture (Amman, Jordan). She has presented at the "Arts in the One World" conference at Brown University, was recently named one of the Nathan L. Cummings Young Leaders of Color for TCG's 2012 Conference, and attended the 2010 La Mama International Symposium for Directors in Umbria, Italy.

Yussef El Guindi's (panelist, CCT) most recent productions include PILGRIMS MUSA AND SHERI IN THE NEW WORLD (Steinberg Best New Play Award, 2012) and LANGUAGE ROOMS (Edgerton Foundation New American Play Award and ACT Theatre New Play Award). El Guindi's plays have been produced by Golden Thread Productions and Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco; by Wilma Theater in Philadelphia; and by Latino Theater Company at the Los Angeles Theater Center. His plays, BACK OF THE THROAT, as well as SUCH A BEAUTIFUL VOICE IS SAYEDA'S AND KARIMA'S CITY, have been published by Dramatists Play Service. The latter one-acts have also been included in The Best American Short Plays: 2004-2005, published by Applause Books in 2008. His play TEN ACROBATS IN AN AMAZING LEAP OF FAITH is included in Salaam/Peace: An Anthology of Middle Eastern American Playwrights, published by TCG, 2009. El Guindi is the current recipient of the Middle East America Award.

Sara Felder (panelist, CCT) is a solo theater artist, playwright, humorist, teacher, activist, and juggler, based in Oakland, CA. She ran away with SAN FRANCISCO'S PICKLE FAMILY CIRCUS, was a featured act in JOEL GREY'S BORSCHT CAPADES, and toured Cuba & Nicaragua with JUGGLERS FOR PEACE. Felder opened for Joan Rivers and has also taught juggling and performance in California prisons. Her solo plays have included the themes of Jewish same-sex marriage (JUNE BRIDE), the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (OUT OF SIGHT), and grief (A QUEER DIVINE)—all comedies. Felder has earned fellowships, commissions, and residencies from the SF Arts Council, the California Arts Council, Headlands Center for the Arts, Philadelphia Theatre Initiative, the Leeway Transformation grant (awarded to artists committed to social change), and the Creative Work Fund for the upcoming MELANCHOLY, A COMEDY (a play on Abraham Lincoln). She currently teaches at Berkeley Rep School of Theater and tours her solo plays. sarafelder.com.

Philip Kan Gotanda (panelist, EP) has done much to broaden our definition of theater in America. Through his plays and advocacy, Philip has been instrumental in bringing stories of Asians in the United States to American theater as well as to Europe and Asia. Among his works include: AFTER THE WAR, I DREAM OF CHANG AND ENG, LOVE IN AMERICAN TIMES, #5 ANGRY RED DRUM, APRICOTS OF ANDUJAR (opera). His plays have been produced by: American Conservatory Theater, Asian American Theater Company, Berkeley Repertory Theater, Campo Santo+Intersection, San Jose Repertory, The Gate Theater, Huntington Theater, Manhattan Theater Club, Mingei Geikidan, New York Shakespeare Festival among others. philipkangotanda.com

Haleh Hatami's (chair, RTV) poems, essays, and translations have been published in various journals, including Brooklyn Review, Phoebe, Faultline, Chain, FO A RM, ZZZZYVA, and Fourteen Hills as well as in anthologies like Bay Poetics (Faux Press), Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: Writings from Women in the Iranian Diaspora (University of Arkansas). Translations from Persian appear in Kenyon Review, 26, and Strange Times, My Dear: The PEN Anthology of Contemporary Iranian Literature. She received the CPIC Life Poetry Award at San Francisco State University and the Ann Fields Poetry Award judged by Gillian Conoley. She has taught courses in Creative Writing at San Francisco State and at Mills College. Currently, she applies her poetics to the production of short videos.

Joan Holden (chair, CCT) was resident playwright for more than three decades at the country's longest-running political theater, the San Francisco Mime Troupe. Her farcical satires and historical epics with the company toured nationally from 1967 to 1999, winning the Troupe three Obie (Off-Broadway) awards and the 1987 Tony Award for Regional Theatre. Nationally, Joan is best known as author of the widely-produced stage adaptation of Barbara Ehrenreich's NICKEL AND DIMED. She has also adapted comedies by Ben Jonson, Molière, Beaumarchais, and Dario Fo for American Conservatory Theater and Berkeley Repertory Theatre; taught playwriting at the University of California, Davis and San Francisco State University; has written influential articles on comedy and melodrama; and has participated in many international collaborations.

Laura Hope (chair, EP), assistant professor of theatre arts and dance at Loyola University, has served as the resident dramaturg at the California Shakespeare Theatre, and has worked at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco as Literary Manager and Festival Director. An associate artist with Golden Thread Productions, Hope has directed and selected scripts for the ReOrient Festival. As a cofounder of Shee Theatre Company in San Francisco, Hope is devoted to developing women artists for the theatre, and has worked with the Bay Area Playwrights Foundation as an actor, literary manager, associate producer, and dramaturg. She performed with numerous companies throughout the San Francisco Bay Area including Magic Theatre, the Shee Theatre Company, Crowded Fire, A Traveling Jewish Theatre, TheatreWorks, and the San Francisco Playhouse, receiving a Dean Goodman Choice Award for best actress for her performance in the title role of AUGUSTINE (BIG HYSTERIA) by Anna Furse.

Zara Houshmand (panelist, RTV) is an Iranian-American writer who has worked in theatre as a director and designer, studying with Bijan Mofid whose plays she translated. Her own play, THE FUTURE AIN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE, was produced at the Burbage Theatre in Los Angeles, directed by Deborah LaVine. An interest in traditional Asian theatre led her to study

Balinese shadow puppetry and Tibetan opera. She was involved in the development of virtual reality as an art form, and created the installation, *BEYOND MANZANAR*, in collaboration with Tamiko Thiel. The piece, exploring parallels between the lives of Japanese-Americans during World War II and Iranian-Americans now, has been exhibited internationally and is in the permanent collection of the San Jose Museum of Art. She is the coauthor of *A MIRROR GARDEN*, a memoir of Iranian artist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, and her poetry has appeared in many journals and anthologies.

Prior to joining freeDimensional, where he serves as director, **Sidd Joag (panelist, RR)** has worked with community arts projects in New York, India, China and co-founded an artist residency/exchange program in Southwestern China, which focuses on ethnic minority cultural preservation in the China-Burma borderlands. Sidd has an MSc in Sociology from the London School of Economics and Political Science with concentrations in crime, control and globalization, cultural theory and new media and a BA in sociology from New York University. His paintings, installations, and experimental films have been seen in the United States, Canada, India, the Philippines, China, and Northern Ireland. He is a cofounder of Zero Capital Arts, which supports low-cost socially and politically engaged creative projects and exhibitions.

After pursuing his MFA (Directing) at Carnegie-Mellon University School of Drama, **Hafiz Karmali (panelist, RTV)** served an apprenticeship at the American Repertory Theatre (ART) at Harvard where he assisted internationally renowned directors Robert Wilson and Andrei Serban. While at the ART, he was a Teaching Fellow in the English Department at Harvard University for courses taught by Professor Robert Brustein. Most recently, Hafiz remounted his favorite Sufi poem *Conference of the Birds* by Farid uddin Attar in Vancouver. Hafiz has directed *RUMI x 7 = TALES FROM THE MASNAVI* in circus style at Golden Thread Productions, San Francisco (2011). As a special event to commemorate Prince Karim Aga Khan's golden jubilee as spiritual leader, Hafiz cowrote and directed an international touring theatre production, *ALI TO KARIM—A TRIBUTE TO THE ISMAILI IMAMS* (London 2008). Mr. Karmali has a special interest in crosscultural performances with a view to showcasing indigenous performing arts of the Islamic world.

Nazy Kaviani (panelist, RR) is a writer, human rights worker, and promoter of Iranian arts and culture in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is also a translator and researcher, focusing on violations of human rights in Iran. She is a frequent contributor to the websites *Iranian.com*, and others. Nazy's poetry and writing have been published in *The Poetry of Iranian Women*, and in *Confronting the Clash: The Suppressed Voices of Iran*, to be released in the Fall of 2012. She has recently completed translating and editing *SKETCHES OF IRAN*, a book of essays and cartoons about the situation of human rights in Iran, published by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, planned to be released in the upcoming months.

Gülgün Kayım (panelist, EP) is an artist, curator, writer, teacher, and cofounder of *Skewed Visions*, an award winning Minneapolis based, site-specific performance collective. She is the Director of Arts, Culture and Creative Economy for the City of Minneapolis and teaches at the University of Minnesota Department of Theatre Arts and Dance. Her large-scale sited performances engage spoken word, movement, installation and sound, to investigate the cultural resonances of conflict through location, biography and memory. She has worked in

her homeland of Cyprus, the US, London, and Russia. Her work has been recognized by a Creative Capital Grant, Shannon Leadership Fellowship, International Peace Fellowship, an Archibald Bush Foundation Artist Fellowship, Jerome Foundation Travel/Study Grant, three Minnesota State Arts Board Theatre Fellowships, Trust for Mutual Understanding funding, NEA, and McKnight Foundation support among others. Kayim was a 2006 Walker Art Center resident artist and a 2004 City Pages Artist of the Year.

Jamil Khoury (panelist, MEAP) serves as the artistic director of Chicago's Silk Road Rising and is an award-winning playwright. His plays focus on Middle Eastern theme of diaspora and he is particularly interested in the intersection of culture, national identity, sexuality, and class. Currently writing the new feature film/docudrama, MOSQUE ALERT, Khoury is developing a first-of-its-kind, interactive, online, play development and civic engagement process. Khoury has conceived of numerous plays, including: the cabarets RE-SPICED: A SILK ROAD CABARET (2012) and SILK ROAD CABARET: BROADWAY SINGS THE SILK ROAD (2009); Silk Road's production of THE DNA TRAIL: A GENEALOGY OF SHORT PLAYS ABOUT ANCESTRY, IDENTITY, AND UTTER CONFUSION (2010); the short play WASP: WHITE ARAB SLOVAK POLE, which inspired the short video-play both/and (2011) and the documentary film NOT QUITE WHITE: ARABS, SLAVS, AND THE CONTOURS OF CONTESTED WHITENESS (2012); THE BALANCING ARAB (2012); PRECIOUS STONES, which won Gay Chicago Magazine's 2003 After Dark Award for Outstanding New Work; FITNA, performed at the University of Chicago; and AZIZATI, performed at Café Voltaire.

Roberta Levitow (panelist, EP) has directed over 50 productions nationally, with a particular emphasis on developing original writing and new American work. She is cofounder of Theatre Without Borders, an informal group supporting international theatre exchange at theatrewithoutborders.com. With Golden Thread, Roberta initiated the Iran-Israel-US project, which evolved into the play, BENEDICTUS (2007); presented Iraqi and Pakistani artists at the TCG Conference 2011; and participated in the planning and implementation of 2009 ReOrient Forum. She was the American Honoree at the 15th Cairo International Festival, 2003 and received TCG's Alan Schneider Award for directorial excellence in 1992. Roberta is a Fulbright Ambassador and an Artistic Associate at the Sundance Institute East Africa.

Jessica Litwak (panelist, RR), is a theatre artist (playwright and performer), registered drama therapist, teacher, and an activist/organizer. A coleader of the Arts and Human Rights initiative for TWB, Litwak is a trainer for Acting Together On The World Stage for freeDimensional . Teaching courses in Theatre for Personal and Social Change, he is a co-founder of The Dream Act Union, Artistic Director of the New Generation Theatre Ensemble, and The H.E.A.T. Collective – and organization dedicated to Healing, Education, Activism and Theatre. Litwak's work has been published by Applause Books, Smith and Krause, and The New York Times. Her many plays include: THE EMMA GOLDMAN TRILOGY: LOVE ANARCHY AND OTHER AFFAIRS, THE SNAKE AND THE FALCON, NOBODY IS SLEEPING, and A PIRATE'S LULLABY. Litwak has a BFA from New York University's Experimental Theatre Wing and an MFA from Columbia University. She is a PhD candidate at Antioch University in Leadership and Change Through the Arts.

Angela Marino (panelist, WDWT) received her PhD in performance studies from New York University. She is currently an Assistant Professor at the University of California, Berkeley in

the Department of Theater, Dance and Performance Studies. Her research focuses on politics and performance in the Americas. Marino is co-editor and curator of a book and website on the devil in festive performance, which traces the devil figure in religious fiestas, carnival, and theater in the American hemisphere.

Saxophonist/theorist **Hafez Modirzadeh (performer)** has performed, recorded, published, and lectured internationally on original crosscultural musical concepts, which include CONVERGENCE LIBERATION (in Critical Studies in Improvisation, 2011), COMPOST MUSIC (in Leonardo, 2009), AURAL ARCHETYPES (in Black Music Research, 2001), as well as CHROMODALITY (for Wesleyan University, 1992). Twice an NEA Jazz Fellow, in 2006, Modirzadeh was granted a Senior Fulbright Award to work with Flamenco and Gnawan traditions in Andalusia and Morocco. His decades-long collaboration with Ramin Zoufonoun includes the CD, THE MYSTERY OF SAMA (AsianImprov Records, 1998), while his latest release, POST-CHROMODAL OUT! (Pi Records, 2012) is available at pirecordings.com/album/pi44. Dr. Modirzadeh is currently a Professor of World Cultures in Music at San Francisco State University. hafezmodirzadeh.com.

Hadia Ahmed Mousa (panelist, ASDR) is an Assistant Lecturer at Helwan University, Egypt (Faculty of Arts, Theatre Department). She is currently a PhD student and scholar-in-residence at City University of New York (CUNY). She is conducting her research under the supervision of Professor Marvin Carlson. Her field of interest is women studies and the Western and Egyptian avant-garde theatre. Her book WOMEN DIRECTORS IN THE EGYPTIAN THEATRE is soon to be published by the Supreme Egyptian Council of Culture. She has also published articles in various magazines such as China Today and Ebdaa Magazine.

Zahra Noorbakhsh (panelist, CCT) is a writer, performer, and stand-up comedian. New Yorker Magazine dubbed her one-woman show, ALL ATHEISTS ARE MUSLIM, a highlight of the New York International Fringe Festival. She has had sold-out performances in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Zahra contributed the piece THE BIRDS, THE BEES—AND MY HOLE TO THE GROUNDBREAKING, New York Times-featured anthology, LOVE INSHALLAH: THE SECRET LOVE LIVES OF AMERICAN MUSLIM WOMEN. Zahra has also performed at colleges around the country, the SF Theatre Festival, the Solo Performance Workshop Festival, and is one-third of the troupe DISoriented, a trio of Asian-American performers, touring nationwide. As a comedian, she was a finalist in the Aspen National Rooftop College Comedy Competition and has performed with international acts, MAZ JOBRANI (Axis of Evil), and SHAZIA MIRZA (Last Comic Standing).

A vigorous proponent of unusual classical literature and a passionate advocate of new work and theatrical forms, **Carey Perloff (panelist, SME)** has been artistic director of acclaimed American Conservatory Theater (ACT) in San Francisco since 1992. Perloff has directed dozens of award-winning productions for ACT, including the American premieres of works by Tom Stoppard, Harold Pinter, and Timberlake Wertenbaker, world premieres by Philip Kan Gotanda, Constance Congdon, and Mac Wellman, and new interpretations of Schiller, Webster, Euripides, Gorky, Gogol, and Molière. Perloff collaborated with choreographer Val Caniparoli on The Tosca Project. An accomplished playwright, Perloff is the author of LUMINESCENCE DATING, THE COLOSSUS OF RHODES, HIGHER, and WAITING FOR THE FLOOD. Perloff received a BA in classics and comparative literature from Stanford University and was a Fulbright Fellow at Oxford University. Before joining ACT, Perloff was Artistic Director of

OBIE award-winning Classic Stage Company in New York. She was recently honored with France's Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

Naghmeh Samini (panelist, ASDR) was born in 1973 in Iran and received her BA in drama and MA in cinema both from the University of Tehran, holding a PhD in drama and mythology. Her award-winning plays include *THE SPELL OF BURNT TEMPLE* (2001), *SLEEPING IN AN EMPTY CUP* (2003), *DEATH AND POET* (2006), *THE HOME* (2009), *BORN IN 1982* (2010) and have been staged in Iran, France, India, Germany. She has also written several screenplays, including *MAIN LINE*, *THREE WOMEN*, and *HEIRAN*. She is a professor at the University of Tehran and has also run several workshops in Iran and abroad. Along with her plays, she has had two papers about *Thousand and One Nights* and Iranian Drama and Mythology have been published.

Sean San José (panelist, SME), co-founder of Campo Santo of San Francisco's Intersection for the Arts, is Program Director of Theatre for Intersection for the Arts, San José has helped create and curate a new program called the Hybrid Project, formed to bring together artists of all genres, merging differing and emerging styles of performance in order to find a new performance language. He conceived the theater project *PIECES OF THE QUILT*, a collection of short plays confronting the AIDS epidemic. San José organized and created the AIDS Service Arts organization Alma Delfina Group-Teatro Contra el SIDA. He has been awarded the Audrey Skirball-Kennis TIME Grant Awards, San Francisco Arts Commission Individual Artist Commission, two residencies at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts from the Wattis Artist Residency, a Bay Area Critics' Circle Award, the DramaLogue Award, Backstage West, the Cable Car Award, and the Bay Guardian Goldie Artistic Achievement in Theatre Award.

Octavio Solis (panelist, WDWT) is a playwright and director living in San Francisco. His works (*CLOUDLANDS*, *THE PASTURES OF HEAVEN*, *GHOSTS OF THE RIVER*, *QUIXOTE*, *LYDIA*, *JUNE IN A BOX*, *LETHE*, *MARFA LIGHTS*, *GIBRALTAR*, *THE BALLAD OF PANCHE AND LUCY*, *THE 7 VISIONS OF ENCARNACIÓN*, *BETHLEHEM*, *DREAMLANDIA*, *EL OTRO*, *MAN OF THE FLESH*, *PROSPECT*, *EL PASO BLUE*, *SANTOS & SANTOS*, and *LA POSADA MÁGICA*) have been mounted throughout the San Francisco Bay Area and across the country. His anthology *THE RIVER PLAYS* is published by NoPassport Press. He is a 2012 United States Artists Fellow, a Thornton Wilder Fellow for the MacDowell Colony, a New Dramatists alumnus, and a member of the Dramatists Guild. He is presently working on new pieces for the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Magic Theatre, and Yale Repertory Theatre.

José Luis Valenzuela (panelist, WDWT), artistic director of Los Angeles Theater Center, is an award winning theater/film director and tenured professor at the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television. He has directed at the Los Angeles Theatre Center where he created the Latino Theatre Lab in 1985, and at the Mark Taper Forum where he established the Latino Theater Initiative. He most recently directed *LA VICTIMA* by El Teatro de LA ESPERANZA (LATC), and *LA VIRGEN DE GUADALUPE*, *DIOS INANTZIN* (*OUR LADY OF THE ANGELS CATHEDRAL*), all produced by the Latino Theater Company. His international directing credits include Henrik Ibsen's *PEER GYNT* at the Norland Theatre in Norway and Manuel Puig's *KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN* at the National Theatre of Norway. In 2002 he directed the World premiere of *Dementia*. Mr. Valenzuela has been featured in the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times for his annual pageant play *LA VIRGEN DE GUADALUPE*, *DIOS INANTZIN*. Mr. Valenzuela's has received numerous awards including the Ann C. Rosenfield Distinguished

Community Partnership Prize presented by UCLA Center for Community Partnerships, and the Hispanic Heritage Month Local Hero of the Year Award.

Roberto Gutiérrez Varea (chair, RR / panelist, WDWT) began his career in theater in his native Argentina. His research and creative work focuses on live performance as means of resistance and peace building in the context of social conflict and state violence. Varea's stage work in the United States includes directing premieres of works by Migdalia Cruz, Ariel Dorfman, Cherrié Moraga, and José Rivera, among others. He is the founding artistic director of Soapstone Theatre Company, a collective of male ex-offenders and women survivors of violent crime, and El Teatro Jornalero!, a performance company that brings the voice of Latin American immigrant workers to the stage. He is a regular contributor to journals in performance/peace building, and is coeditor and coauthor of the two-volume anthology *ACTING TOGETHER: PERFORMANCE AND THE CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION OF CONFLICT* (New Village Press). Varea is the director of the Center for Latino Studies in the Americas (CELASA) at the University of San Francisco.

Artistic Director of Crowded Fire Theater, **Marissa Wolf's (panelist, SME)** recent directing credits include *PRECIOUS LITTLE* by Madeleine George at Shotgun Players, and the West Coast Premiere of *SONGS OF THE DRAGONS FLYING TO HEAVEN* by Young Jean Lee for Crowded Fire and AATC, for which she was nominated for Best Director by Broadway World San Francisco and the Bay Area Critics' Circle Award. She has directed at Magic Theatre, Cutting Ball Theatre, Shotgun Players, Vanguardian Productions, and Playwrights Foundation. Wolf previously held the Bret C. Harte Directing Internship at Berkeley Rep for two years, where she assisted renowned directors, including Tony Taccone, Les Waters, Lisa Peterson, Frank Galati, and Mary Zimmerman. Marissa has her degree in drama from Vassar College, and received additional training at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London.

A native of England, **Andrew Wood (panelist, EP)** is the founder of the San Francisco International Arts Festival (SFIAF), which coordinates multiple Bay Area non-profit organizations and artists to produce an annual series. SFIAF both commissions and produces new work by local artists engaged in international projects and presents the existing repertoire of ensembles from around the world. Andrew has had the good fortune to work with many world-class international artists and their equally brilliant local counterparts to present their projects on the Festival's stages. Prior to creating SFIAF, Andrew was the director of ODC Theater transforming the venue from being primarily a rental facility with an annual income of \$150,000 into a multi-disciplinary presenting organization with a budget of nearly half a million dollars. Andrew has been an artist manager and arranged touring engagements for numerous ensembles including the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

Torange Yeghiazarian (chair, WDWT / panelist, PP) is the Founding Artistic Director of Golden Thread Productions and has published articles on contemporary theatre in *The Drama Review* (2012), *American Theatre Magazine* (2010) and *Theatre Bay Area* (2010). Torange's latest play, *444 DAYS* will premiere at Golden Thread in 2013. Her play *CALL ME MEHDI* is included in "Salaam/Peace: An Anthology of Middle Eastern- American Drama" TCG, 2009. Other plays include *WAVES*, *DAWN AT MIDNIGHT*, *BEHIND GLASS WINDOWS*, and *PUBLICLY RESTING*. A collaborator among Iranian, Israeli and American artists responsible for *BENEDICTUS* (2007), Torange also adapted the poetry of Simin Behbehani to the stage in *I SELL SOULS* (2008). Other directing credits include *A GIRL'S WAR* by Joyce Van Dyke, *NINE ARMENIANS*

by Leslie Ayvasian, TAMAM by Betty Shamieh, THREE STOPS AND SCENIC ROUTES by Yussef el Guindi. Born in Iran and of Armenian heritage, Torange holds a Master's degree in Theatre Arts from San Francisco State University.

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Revisiting the ReOrient

Golden Thread's festival of plays exploring the Middle East turns 10

THEATER It's the fall of 2001. The Americans have arrived. The Taliban is, for the moment, displaced. A young Afghani woman named Alya (Sara Razavi) stands in a burka, holding a suitcase. She's met by her older sister, Meena (Nora el Samahy), returned from England to fetch her. Meena wears a headscarf but leaves her face proudly, fearlessly uncovered. She speaks of the freedoms ahead of them, the chance to study, even to talk to men. Alya is scandalized and fascinated.

The two sisters go on to engage in petty quarrels, teasing. Meena calls the younger one a hedgehog, a familiar nickname apparently, while noting she's gained a woman's figure since Meena has been away. Alya complains of her aching back — the result, she claims, of quills sprouting along her spine. Meena tells her about being carried one night by a gallant English stranger, leaving her sister beside herself with moral outrage and prurient interest.

All the while, nearby, the body of a young American soldier (Basel Al-Naffouri) lies sprawled on a large pillow. He's soon on his feet — or socks rather, his boots having disappeared — ostensibly having slept off a night of revelry. Regarding the two young women in his room with some surprise, and self-congratulation, he confronts what he believes to be the previous night's "conquests." He also seems to think he's awoken in his mother's house in Gary, Ind. He shouts for his mother and wonders aloud where his shoes have gone, but his cries are literally bootless.

We appear to have wandered into a dream — but whose exactly? Naomi Wallace's *NO SUCH COLD THING* unsettles the ground beneath our feet much as her characters have found it vanishing beneath their own. The characters now meet on some existential plateau — pitched, dreamlike, somewhere between life and death — as Wallace expertly pinpoints the reality of war in the magical-surreal of dramatic imagination.

In a moment characterized by a decided lack of public antiwar momentum around the continuing tragedy of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, the world premiere of Wallace's *NO SUCH COLD THING* could not be timelier. Nor, for that matter, could it be a more apt play to lead off Golden Thread Productions' 10th anniversary edition of its ReOrient Festival, an annual cavalcade of short plays about the Middle East that has itself provided, in addition to a

dependable variety of aesthetic pleasures, crucial space for public consideration and dialogue.

This year's anniversary program makes the most of that function with an accompanying two-day forum (Dec. 5-6 at Theatre Artaud) to include discussion panels, a book launch, an art exhibit, music and dance performances, and Golden Thread's first live internet-streamed play, *THE REVIEW*, written by GT stalwart Yusef El Guindi (*BACK OF THE THROAT*; *JIHAD JONES AND THE KALASHNIKOV BABES*), featuring one actor in San Francisco and another in the Middle East.

In addition to Wallace's quietly striking world premiere — which finds a winning balance of playful insouciance and poignant understatement in the hands of director Bella Warda and her cast — the dramatic program includes eight more plays spread over two rotating series. Emphasizing highlights of previous years, ReOrient 2009's opening night program included a remounting of Betty Shamieh's *TAMAM*, directed by GT artistic director Torange Yeghiazarian, a dual "monologue" from the perspective of a proud and embattled Palestinian woman, featuring el Samahy and Maryam Farnaz Rostami tastefully accompanied by percussionist Su Tang. It was followed by Yeghiazarian's own irreverently funny charmer, *CALL ME MEHDI*, neatly directed by Arlene Hood, in which an Iranian American woman (Ahou Tabibzadeh, reprising her 2005 performance with aplomb) and her Farsi-challenged American husband (solid newcomer George Psarras) give late-night vent to some cross-cultural baggage. Finally, Motti Lerner's *COMING HOME* (2003), well cast and sharply directed by Mark Routhier, provocatively unfolded the homecoming of a disturbed young Israeli soldier from the front lines of the occupation.

The second night's program (seen too late for review) is also full of some small gems, including two from El Guindi his Cairo-centered adaptation of Chekhov's *A MARRIAGE PROPOSAL* and his 2007 *THE MONOLOGIST SUFFERS HER MONOLOGUE*) as well as the 1999 play from San Francisco-based filmmaker Kaveh Zahedi (*I AM NOT A SEX ADDICT*) with the characteristically emphatic title, *I'M NOT A SERIAL KILLER*.

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San Jose Mercury News

Five Plays 'ReOrient' Focus

By Karen D'Souza

January 14, 2008

Global geopolitics get stripped down into flesh and blood in "ReOrient." An old man can't wash away the memory of watching his son's head get blown off. A dying woman refuses to flee her home as bombs approach. A bag of red pistachios is mistaken for the signal of a sleeper cell.

At a time when the Middle East dominates the headlines, "ReOrient" aspires to forge clarity out of chaos. The Golden Thread company has woven a tapestry of five short plays designed to shift the bent of our gaze about the cradle of civilization. If not all of the works in this wildly diverse showcase burn as brightly as they yearn to, "ReOrient" boldly tries to focus the chatter of current events into the light and heat of art. This timely festival incites us to look past the 24/7 media blitz to see the cycles of tragedy.

Take 22 MINUTES REMAINING, which plunges us deep into the farce of warfare. The tart vignette, in which a Lebanese woman (a deeply grounded Lynne Soffer) receives a courtesy call that her village is about to be bombed, is steeped in reality. Playwright Ignacio Zulueta mines the absurdity of abiding by polite codes of behavior while sirens shatter the ear.

Pain begets pain amid the opaque poetry of I SELL SOULS, perhaps the most intensely focused piece of the collection (directed by Torange Yeghiazarian). Dreamy images float before us as choral riffs fuse into a fugue. A man (the estimable Julian Lopez-Morillas) recites shards of Simin Behbehani's poetry as apparitions dance through the holes in his reveries. The man talks of a debased culture, bereft of intangible values, cynically consoling itself with cold hard cash — but the meaning of the piece remains as elusive as the shadows that flicker in the corner of our mind's eye.

THE MONOLOGUIST SUFFERS HER MONOLOGUE represents a stark departure in tone and scope. This is political anthropology as stand-up comedy, and actress Sara Razavi charges the piece with a nervy intensity that makes up for the didactic nature of Yussef El Guindi's call for a deeper understanding of the Palestinian plight. While the solo doesn't tickle the funny bone as hard as it intends to, there is something truly liberating about approaching pain with punch lines.

Razavi also stars in PISTACHIO STORIES, another play that roots its message in whimsy. Laura Shamas' story takes us back to the days right after Sept. 11, when Arab-Americans felt the radar of suspicion trained squarely on their backs. A seemingly harmless bag of nuts sets off a chain of doubts about the strange van that seems to have them under surveillance. Are they simply being paranoid? Or is there a point where homeland security tips into police state? And how would we know if we got there?

To be sure, the most ambitious piece of the festival is Naomi Wallace's BETWEEN THIS BREATH AND YOU. The Obie-winning playwright attacks the amorphousness of identity politics in this

melodrama about an organ transplant that connects a Palestinian man (Lopez-Morillas), an Israeli janitor and an American nurse (Danielle Levin) at a West Bank medical clinic.

There's no denying Wallace's gift for crystallizing experience into the most lyrical and elliptical of poetry. As in her noted *THE TRESTLE AT POPE LICK CREEK*, Wallace parses her words so carefully that they have to be turned over a few times to reveal all of their colors, like a crystal. And director Amy Mueller harnesses fierce performances from Lopez-Morillas and Levin. And yet there is a sense of urgency missing from this production that keeps the play from being truly compelling. That lack of propulsion prevents the text from cutting far enough into the bone to make us feel the wound.

Arts & Entertainment:

Golden Thread Breaks Ground with International Skype Play

By Ken Bullock, Special to the Planet

Thursday December 10, 2009

A male writer wants his girlfriend's opinion of a story he's written. The writer is in the States; the woman in question is living in Cairo. The text could be obliquely about their relationship, or at least his attitude about relationships, with Arab women in particular. What are her thoughts? "Be frank, even brutal," he says. The writer—and lover—is asking for it.

The audience for Yussef Al-Guindi's acerbicly funny dialogue, *THE REVIEW*, which premiered at Theatre Artaud during Golden Thread's ReOrient Forum: Middle East Center Stage last weekend, never saw or heard more than a few tossed-off snippets of Ratib's story. But they did get the impact of Shadeeyah's review of story, storyteller—and of his "storytelling" in general—through their hilariously contentious dialogue across borders and time zones.

But this wasn't a parody of *LOVE LETTERS*, actors reading from lecterns or sitting across the stage from each other to coyly mimic distance.

In what could be the first live international theater presentation using the Internet, actors James Asher in San Francisco and Zeinab Magdy in Cairo wrangled face-to-face over Skype, half a world away from each other. And the disparities of distance and culture were writ bold in the stunning immediacy of voice and image.

"Why are all your stories about the same thing, an Arab woman and an Arab guy, usually a nebbish?" Shadeeyah starts in. Before the end of the call and the play, they've delved into sex, politics and culture.

"For somebody raised in America, you have a very Middle Eastern view of women! Please don't dress up your male fantasies in political guise," she snaps. And he: "In America, the personal is political! For the record, Americans don't like politics in art. They feel they're getting preached at." He refers to his story as a stealthy game, "cleverly putting in what I intend to say, and they think it says nothing!"

The time difference accents the night and day of their sensibilities. Natib in his bathrobe finally stands up from his laptop to argue hysterically with the enormous projection (in every sense of the word) of Shadeeyah's face on a screen upstage, his body about the size of her visage.

A lively conversation over the Internet followed. The playwright, in Cairo, remarked he'd written *THE REVIEW* with an audience seated before a proscenium stage in mind: "but now, on the Internet, with audiences in both places, it's in the round!" Directors Hafiz Karmali (San

Francisco) and Dina Amin (Cairo) spoke about their differences of interpretation. “Yussef has it in the script,” joked Karmali. “It’s all about couples!”

Golden Thread hopes to put the groundbreaking production on YouTube, and maybe to have it streamed over the Internet to reproduce the theatricality of the long-distance interchange. Meanwhile, there’s still another weekend of ReOrient’s tenth anniversary celebration at Thick House on Potrero Hill, with nine short plays in two series. For information call (415) 626-4061 or see www.goldenthread.org

Reorientalism

A festival of Middle Eastern drama witnesses the emergence of a new immigrant community—and a new category of U.S. theatre

BY RANDY GENER



Charles Isen, Raffi Wartanian and Leah Herman in *Coming Home*, by Motti Lerner.

ON DECEMBER 1—FOUR DAYS BEFORE GOLDEN Thread Productions staged a two-day forum as part of ReOrient Festival 2009 at Theatre Artaud in San Francisco—President Barack Obama gave an Afghanistan war speech at West Point that left many Americans feeling déjà vu all over again. “I have determined that it is in our vital national interest to send an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan,” the president said. “After 18 months, our troops will begin to come home.” This strategy, which acknowledged that the Afghan people would likely suffer the ravages of a civil war if the withdrawal were immediate, lurched between a surge and an exit. The rest of Obama’s speech suggested that our interests, our means and our responsibility are finite in Afghanistan, but they do exist. As Obama put it, “We simply can’t afford to ignore the price of these wars.”

During the previous administration, Iraq dominated the U.S. media, while that other war in Central Asia, which had started earlier and is focused primarily today on preventing the growth of terrorism, was largely ignored. Predictably, plays about Iraq proliferated on American stages during the aught decade, from Heather Raffo’s richly personal *9 Parts of Desire* and Josh Fox and Jason Christopher Hartley’s riveting *Surrender* to George Packer’s *Betrayed*, Ellen McLaughlin’s *Ajax in Iraq*, and the extraordinary documentary play *Aftermath* by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen. But when it comes to that other landlocked nation, to which our newly minted Nobel Peace laureate has decided to send more troops, the U.S. theatre has remained an extremely late responder.

This geographically lopsided state of affairs has been true in both British and U.S. theatres. The Bush/Blair axis revved up the fortunes of political theatre in both countries, but even

as some angry or furrow-browed playwrights have begun to congratulate themselves for tackling the biggest matters of the day, the dearth persists of English-speaking drama (or drama in any other Western language, for that matter) that ponders our relation to the world-scale troubles brewing in Afghanistan. A pathetically small number of American works have drawn an emphatic circle on the Afghan map. The most notable is Tony Kushner’s 2001 ramble *Homebody/Kabul*. Written before 9/11, it takes place in 1998, just after Bill Clinton’s bombing of the terrorist camps. Reportedly, the Guthrie Theater of Minneapolis is planning to import for its 2010–11 season *The Great Game*, a cycle of 12 half-hour plays about Afghanistan’s history, culture and politics. Yet this ambitious three-evening marathon was commissioned by London’s Tricycle Theatre, and only one of the dozen works was penned by an American (J.T. Rogers). Does the failure of American politicians to grasp local realities in Afghanistan extend to the cultural practices of U.S. theatre artists as well?

That question resonated quietly but powerfully in San Francisco, where Obama’s history-in-the-making war speech coincided with the celebratory events surrounding the 10th-year anniversary of the ReOrient Festival. Marking the historic emergence of a new genre of Middle Eastern–American drama in the U.S., the festival also hosted a book launch for TCG’s *Salaam.Peace*, the first-ever anthology of Middle Eastern–American drama.

GOLDEN THREAD IS A NONPROFIT COMPANY exploring Middle Eastern identities, and of the nine festival plays unveiled on the shadowy stage of the Thick House in

the Portrero Hill district, Naomi Wallace's *No Such Cold Thing* had the distinction of being the only one that directly dealt with the war in Afghanistan. In this poetic parable, three figures—two young Afghan girls and a Chicano soldier from Indiana—loll about restlessly at the edge of a war zone in a desert near Kabul. It's late autumn 2001. For the moment, the Taliban is out of sight. The U.S. serviceman, Sergio, sprawls on a rusty spring bed with a sandbag as a pillow. The younger of the two girls, Alya (played with intensity by Sara Razavi), stands holding a suitcase, dressed in a burqa and U.S. Army boots far too big for her. In the twilight, Alya looks like she might have a hump on her back. "Quills," she explains. "I'm growing quills. Along my spine."

No Such Cold Thing dramatizes a puzzling reunion. Alya's older sister Meena (portrayed by a confident and lovely Nora el Samahy) has returned from England to fetch her. A taxi is waiting for them; their father is presumably at the airport. Partly because of the 300 sharp quills growing on Alya's back, however, Meena is having trouble convincing her sister to leave. "My back hurts," Alya complains. "It hurts so much I can hardly move." In director Bella Warda's mournful staging, one got the awful sense that those heavy boots were keeping Alya stolidly in place.

Proud Meena, her face naked to the elements, attempts to convince her sister to flee Afghanistan by speaking of the freedoms that lie ahead of them. In the West, Alya would be free to study the Urdu poetry of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and the male of the species would no longer be forbidden territory: "I've been held in the arms. Of a man," Meena says, recalling the night she was carried by an honorable English stranger. "I couldn't find my way home. I got lost. I was tired, and he put his arms around me and carried me." Upon hearing this story, Alya is overtaken by a complex rush of prurient fascination, moral repulsion and aching longing. "Did he squeeze your boobs?" she wonders, then asserts: "That's a death sentence for you here. Whore. Whore. I have missed you every hour."

When Sergio (the likable Basel Al-Naffouri) wakes up, he wonders aloud where his army boots have gone, thinks (wrongly) that he slept off a night of drunken sexual revelry with the two sisters, and assumes that he is still living in mother's house in Gary, Ind. This American soldier's state of disorientation might be a metaphor for blundering American miscomprehension, but it soon

becomes clear in Wallace's compact allegory that the ground has shifted beneath *all* of these characters' feet. The play is actually taking place after their deaths—they aren't in a house or in a bedroom but somewhere in limbo, reunited in the aftermath of a violent encounter in which 20 or 30 American soldiers came upon an Afghan village. It was Sergio who shot Meena and, amid his shock and guilt, tried to carry her into the shade to stop her bleeding. He failed. Sergio and his fleeing buddies were then interrupted by a land mine. Alya's sandbag of a corpse remains at the bottom of a well.

Grief is a social experience. But while the call for more U.S. troops to fight in the Middle East lends a new urgency and unnerving pertinence to Wallace's death-ridden play, grief is also about slippage. In this play, we seem to have wandered into a nightmare—but whose bad dream is it, exactly? And why is the strangeness of their grief not written in bruised hieroglyphics all over the muted faces of Wallace's characters? Wallace leaves us only with a terse question ("This was your. Freedom. For us?" Alya asks Sergio) before her dead characters exit the perimeters of a

surrealistic plateau. It is as if these three souls were locked in a ritual of self-abasement.

The emotional restraint that grips *No Such Cold Thing* is elucidated in its haunting title, a reference to George Herbert's devotional poem "The Flower" ("Grief melts away / Like snow in May, / As if there were no such cold thing"), in which the poet contemplates the process of one's ironic acceptance of mortality. As evidenced by her heart-stopping collection *The Fever Chart: Three Short Visions of the Middle East*, Wallace, a London-based American writer, has never flinched from confronting the painful truths of the Middle East on U.S. stages. But it is worth noting, for the purposes of appreciating the new Middle Eastern-American drama, that while her representations are sympathetic and theatrically progressive, she is not of Middle Eastern descent, and that she prefers, like Caryl Churchill and Harold Pinter, to address difficult political subjects through quick hits (as opposed to, say, offering grand, overarching epics about the clash of civilizations).

Moreover, Wallace's Middle Eastern plays are frequently deceptive in their settings—she often throws out riddles and

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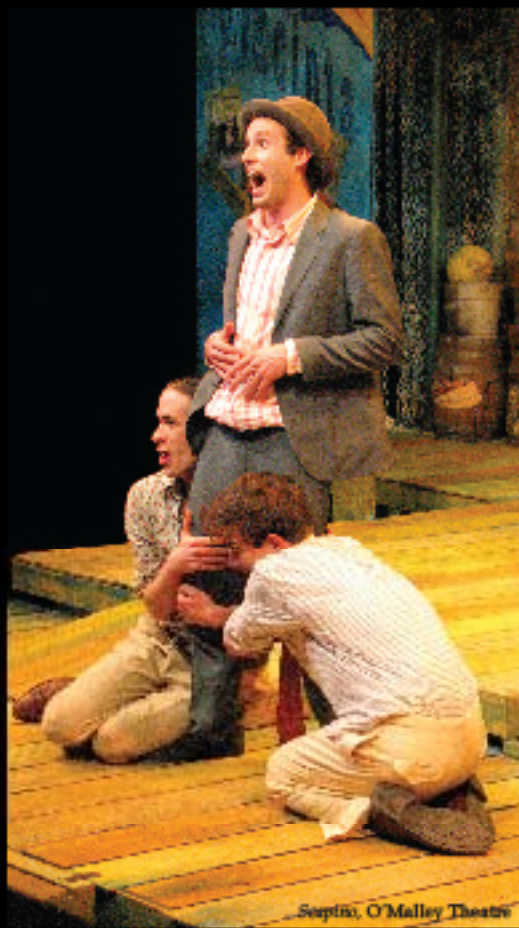
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eerily askew situations. Her characters are likely to be shocked to discover that their present realities are illusory—that the land they are fighting over might as well be a graveyard. In their existential disorientation, Wallace's Middle East plays escape the logic, the prison and the sentimental clichés of a realistic and more sociable theatre, because their impatient narratives take shape only to disintegrate, their dramatic value heightened by the instability of the drama itself.

CONSCIOUSLY OR NOT, MOST HOLLYWOOD and television narratives assume a hostile approach to Arab Americans by characterizing them as helpless pawns, innocent victims or treacherous villains. So rife are the issues of cultural stereotyping in the media that taking a humorous slant has become a popular way for comics and theatre writers to diffuse the tension, perhaps, through such events as the New York Arab-American Comedy Festival or through satirical plays that feast upon the inherent inconsistencies and foibles of Arab and Arab-American culture. A good example: *Browntown*, a blistering comedy anthologized in *Salaam.Peace*,

in which three brown-skinned male actors (two Arab Americans and one Indian American) compete for yet another terrorist role in a less-than-original TV movie called *The Color of Terror*. The play's author, Sam Younis, a Lebanese-American actor and a Texas native, notes: "Why am I routinely a candidate for terrorist roles? Why are these terrorist roles always named Mohamed? Why does that Indian guy keep getting the Arab terrorist parts over me?"

Sometimes in films or on television, a multiculturalist ethos is affirmed through the inclusion of decent Arab types—an assimilation imperative implying that "Arab" or "Muslim" could reliably serve as one half of a moral binary, with "American" on the other side.

"9/11 created great fear of the particular Arab/Muslim 'other,'" points out Dina Amin,



Dina Mousawi, Michael Sommers and Afif Houssain in *A Marriage Proposal*, by Yussef El Guindi.

an Egyptian stage director who is a professor of Arabic literature and language, and co-editor, with the drama critic Holly Hill, of *Salaam.Peace*. "9/11 also resulted in an interest in hearing Arab/Muslim stories—the stranger the story, the better, because that confirms the notion of difference and facilitates demonization. Remember how after 9/11, the popular TV show 'West Wing' went from oversimplification to total vilification of Islam and Muslims, all in one season? What we got after 9/11 was, by and large, two perspectives: On the one hand, Hollywood and the media reflected and analyzed the Arab/Muslim condition inside and outside the U.S., usually in response to the false assumption and naïve question, 'Why do they hate us?'. On the other hand, and as a result of the sweeping stereotyping that took place after 9/11, Arab Americans and Muslim Americans needed to tell their stories from their point of view."

Representing the diversity of Middle Eastern-American points of view, however, is not an easy task. For most of the past century, mainstream America has seen the Middle East as monolithic, made up of people of similar backgrounds and similar opinions. Moreover, American interest in the Middle East has been mapped largely through the intersecting deployment of cultural interests (such as "the Holy Land") and economic investments (i.e., vast reserves of oil). In the theatre, misconceptions about the Middle East are compounded by such heterogeneous factors as language and religion. And that's not even considering the heavy quills on the backs of writers of color: the difficulties of trying to get heard through the medium of theatre.

Patterns of immigration need also be considered. In *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media,*

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Nora el Samahy and Basel Al-Naffouri in *No Such Cold Thing*, by Naomi Wallace.



Sara Razavi expresses herself in El Guindi's *The Monologist Suffers Her Monologue*.

(basically Algerians, Tunisians and Moroccans) are labeled as '*les Beurs*' (slang for Arabs). The treatment of their artistic production can be construed as an expression of their social alienation or marginalization, or simply an expression of difference from their first-generation parents. So these categories are not specific to the American context alone. They exist around the world as a result of migrant populations or colonization."

and *U.S. Interests in the Middle East Since 1945*, Melani McAlister states that "following the 1965 change in immigration laws and especially after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war...increasing numbers of Palestinians, Iraqis, Yemenis and others began to join the Lebanese and Syrians of earlier generations. In contrast to earlier immigrants, these new arrivals were more likely to be Muslims, more nationalist and, after the Black Power and identity movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, more conscious of race and culture, as well as more critical and political, than previous generations." Arab-speaking immigrants soon became the fastest growing ethnic community in Detroit. By 1988, the Arab-American capital of Dearborn, Mich., could lay claim to its own theatre, AJYAL, which produced comedies about the challenges facing Arab immigrants. Meanwhile, the growing Iranian population in the Bay Area began to support a Farsi-speaking theatre group, Darvag, founded in 1985, which, according to Golden Thread Productions founder Torange Yeghiazarian, "created a strong theatre audience in Berkeley through [its] work in Persian."

From the beginning, the study of the contemporary Middle East was bedeviled by problems with definition: What exactly are the parameters of the so-called Middle East? What made it distinct from other regions? The editors of *Salaam.Peace* responded to these quandaries by putting out a call for plays through Arab, Iranian, Turkish and Israeli communities, asking for plays from writers who self-identified as Middle Eastern-Americans—"artists," as Dina Amin further explains, "who do not necessarily have a unified vision or constitute a movement within American theatre so far, but have become

visible, for both positive and negative reasons, only after 9/11, because of their ethnic background."

But in an age of globalization and transnational migrations, why can't plays about the Middle East be considered irrespective of the author's bloodlines? "These categories exist in many parts of the world with varying degrees of distinction or discrimination," Amin says. "For example, North African writers in France

THE AMERICAN-FOCUSED GAZE OF *Salaam.Peace*, which makes perfect sense for an anthology of its scope, stands in contrast to the annual ReOrient Festival, one of the most remarkable aspects of which is the largeness of its producing and artistic vision. Since establishing the festival in 1999, Yeghiazarian has generously embraced all plays *about* the Middle East. Her selections are unsullied by any biases against the specific provenance,



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ancestry or self-identification of the writer. In addition to the Kentucky-born Wallace, the 2009 festival program spotlighted an Egyptian-born writer (the prolific Yussef El Guindi), a Palestinian-American (the fearlessly versatile Betty Shamieh), a white Brooklyn boy (writer/director Kevin Doyle), an Iranian-American (writer/actor/director Kaveh Zahedi), an Israeli (the pugnacious Motti Lerner) and Yeghiazarian herself, who was born in Iran to a Muslim mother and an Armenian Christian father.

Salaam.Peace editor Holly Hill praises Yeghiazarian as “the Margo Jones founding-mother-figure of Middle Eastern-American theatre.” Inspired by Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*—in which the novelist stated that “Disorientation is loss of the East,” and added, “Suppose that it’s only when you dare let go that your real life begins?”—Yeghiazarian employed a pun that is more proactive: Instead of bemoaning the disorientation of living in a world where the pervasive sense is that “It shouldn’t be this way,” the ReOrient Festival adheres to Yeghiazarian’s idea that “To find our way (back) we need to find our East again.” As she



Ahou Tabibzadeh and George Psarras in Torange Yeghiazarian’s *Call Me Mehdi*.

puts it, “Today, 10 years later, we continue to search for our East. Questions of home, identity, agency and longing loom large.”

Yeghiazarian’s own contribution, *Call Me Mehdi*, wittily bears out that search. In this delightful bedroom comedy about a naked couple’s late-night cross-cultural argument, an Iranian-American woman tries to

set her Farsi-challenged American husband straight regarding ethnic-specific Farsi jokes by issuing him a challenge: “Listen, Mr. Very Deep Way, if you really cared about opening up, you’d go to Iran with me.”

If one considers the conspicuous lack of Arab- and Muslim-American voices and visions, even in multicultural theatres in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the troubling social repercussions that followed in the wake of 9/11 (deportations, civil-rights issues, surveillance), it would have been perfectly understandable for Golden Thread to restrict its festival only to writers of Arab and/or Muslim descent. Instead, ReOrient’s 2009 bill revived two works from outside that perspective. Lerner’s emotionally crushing *Coming Home*, originally produced in 2003, chronicles the homecoming of a disturbed young Israeli soldier (devastatingly portrayed by Raffi Wartanian) from the front lines of the occupation. Lerner’s domestic drama about a family dealing with their son’s severe post-traumatic stress disorder—which culminates in the young man throwing off his clothes and squirting ketchup all over the furniture—provoked heated words in an post-performance discussion that involved an Israeli diplomat.

ReOrient also found room for a revival of Kevin Doyle’s 2004 *Compression of a Casualty*, even though, arguably, it isn’t about the Middle East at all. If anything, Doyle’s play is a reaction to the media coverage of the Gulf War. Using the actual dialogue of former CNN “American Morning” news anchors Bill Hemmer and Soledad O’Brien, the play expresses Doyle’s profound anxiety over news coverage that promises but never delivers any

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details about an unnamed American soldier killed in Fallujah in July 2003. Recognizing that the Gulf War was fought as a media spectacle, the play's critical intervention takes the form of the Missouri soldier, Joel L. Bertoldie, disrupting the endlessly repeated newscast to identify himself and offering up personal details that the gossipy news anchors never bothered to report.

IT WAS, OF COURSE, TELEVISION THAT brought the Iran hostage crisis into the homes of millions of Americans night after night, and for many critics of Desert Storm, the saturation of live TV coverage led to a discussion, especially in academic circles, of the Gulf War as the first postmodern war—the war looked like a video game (or a mass-media simulacrum, according to the philosopher Jean Baudrillard), as if the representation of the event *was* the event. By the same token, television forced America to acknowledge the Arabs within.

The spectacular nature of 9/11 was cause enough to see it as a declaration of war on America, so it is hardly surprising, given the journalistic clichés and simplistic nationalism that underlie mass-media discourse, that 9/11 has repeatedly been considered—wrongly—as ground zero for the birth of a new category of Middle Eastern–American drama. The lives and artistic works of Middle Eastern–American artists, whose work both predates and functions apart from 9/11, have thus been tarnished by association with death and destruction. Yussef El Guindi notes in his preface to *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith*, “After 9/11, there was a feeling within the Arab and Muslim community that we had been placed beyond the pale. Though, in truth, we had never really found our way into the cultural conversation, even before 9/11. And now that we had been shoved into that conversation, it was not in a good way. At all.” In a follow-up interview, El Guindi told me, “I do want to emphasize, though, that Middle Eastern–American drama was picking up steam before 9/11. In fact, I felt a flowering of sorts happening in the Arab–American and the larger Middle Eastern arts community. One of my fears after 9/11 was that all those voices that were now emerging would be silenced by this event.”

One of the thought-provoking themes that recurred during the 2009 festival was that at this particular moment, Middle Eastern–American theatre is still in its infancy. If you would like to better understand Middle

Eastern–American theatre and get a better sense of who are the new and major artists and players in this burgeoning field—from theatre companies like Silk Road Theatre Project (see page 90) and Nibras, to new-play initiatives that seek to develop Middle Eastern–American voices—the editors of the *Salaam.Peace* anthology offer an excellent survey that traces its short history. “It will take time for Middle East plays to be known throughout this country,” Holly Hill noted at the forum. “You are going to have to be patient.” In a panel discussion on the theme of “Permission to Represent and Transform,” Turkey-born director/dramaturg Evren Odcikin noted, “America is looking for the next great Middle East playwright who will explore a new terrain about the war, about the politics.” Not much will change for Middle Eastern Americans, Odcikin contended, “until we do something extraordinary. For now, we need to keep giving each other wind and current.”

As Betty Shamieh attests, “I think there is a real trepidation on the part of artistic directors to take on truly challenging stories from Arab and Arab–American writers. It is

problematic that the works about the Middle East that consistently get the most financial support for development and productions in our nation's most important theatrical venues are plays that dehumanize both Arabs and Americans, despite the intentions of some well-meaning writers.”

Add to that quandary the apathy among some U.S. critics who consistently dismiss (or in rare cases apologetically inveigh against) plays that deal with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, like Shamieh's *Tamam* and Lerner's *Coming Home*, by writing things like, “These plays may not change anybody's political convictions,” or “These plays speak to the converted.” Such expressions of impotence don't begin to truly critically grapple with the rich vitality of the new Middle Eastern–American drama, whose real aims are to offer fresh reckonings about a new immigrant experience, to make the invisible visible, and to suggest, both literally and metaphorically, nothing less than a wholesale revision—a reorientation, indeed—of the significance of the Middle East to the mosaic of our collective American identity.



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