

## ***444 Days* Press Packet**

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## Golden Thread Launches Its 2013 Fall Season With The World Premiere of *444 Days* By Founding Artistic Director Torange Yeghiazarian

SAN FRANCISCO (July 1, 2013) - **Golden Thread Productions** kicks off its 2013 Fall season with the **world premiere** of Founding Artistic Director **Torange Yeghiazarian's** *444 Days*, a tangled web of love and betrayal. *444 Days* is an exploration of the relationship between an American hostage and his Iranian captor who meet again decades after the 1979 Iran Hostage Crisis, the first contribution from an Iranian playwright to the renewed interest in the topic ignited by the blockbuster film *Argo*. **Bella Warda**, founding member of the Iranian Theater Group Darvag, directs this gripping tale of international espionage. *444 Days* runs October 17<sup>th</sup> - November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013 at **Z Below** (470 Florida St., San Francisco).

Set in the San Francisco Bay Area, *444 Days* blends historical events with fictional characters, imagining Harry, an American attaché who confronts his captor, Laleh 25 years after their first meeting. This marks the first production of a full-length play by Yeghiazarian since 1998, "I'm drawn to impossible **love affairs**. The obstacles individuals must overcome to **connect as human beings** are hugely amplified when they are political enemies. I love exploring the ways global situations can impact a person's daily life," says Yeghiazarian.

Literary Artistic Associate **Evren Odcikin**, who will produce the production, says: "We're thrilled to reintroduce Torange to our audiences as they first met her—as a playwright. Torange writes with a **deep affection** for her characters and a deep understanding of the issues that divide and connect Iran and the U.S. I know that *444 Days* will have our audiences talking long after the play is done." *444 Days* features some of the Bay Area's most talented designers including Mikiko Uesugi, Jim Cave and Brendan Aanes.

**Golden Thread** is the nation's premiere home for the development of voices from the Middle East and stories about the region. This season continues Golden Thread's long-standing history of staging rarely seen perspectives in American theatre. This year's Fall Season highlights two **female playwrights**, whose plays speak to the diversity in voices and complexity in narrative of Middle Eastern Americans as well as **American theatre**.

[www.goldenthread.org](http://www.goldenthread.org)

**444 Days | October 17 – November 3, 2013**

**By Torange Yeghiazarian | Directed by Bella Warda**

**A tangled web of love, betrayal and espionage**

Can anything survive decades of secrecy, broken promises, and political intrigue? Laleh, an Iranian revolutionary, and Harry, a diplomatic attaché, meet for the first time in 25 years as Laleh's daughter lies in a coma. The last time they spoke was when she held him hostage for 444 days at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran along with 52 other Americans. International espionage and family secrets mesh in unexpected ways in this world premiere play by Golden Thread's award-winning artistic director.

### **Background information on Golden Thread Productions**

[Golden Thread Productions](http://www.goldenthread.org) is a nationally recognized non-profit organization universally acknowledged as the leading theater company devoted to Middle Eastern voices and experiences. Founded in 1996 by **Torange Yeghiazarian**, Golden Thread's mission, to give voice to Middle Eastern writers, is a national treasure, made more urgent and vital with all that is currently happening in the Middle East.

Golden Thread's founder, Torange Yeghiazarian explains "*in our vast imagination, the Middle East is defined not by geographical boundaries and political separations, but as the shared experience of the people, who throughout*



*history have been touched by its tales, melodies and aromas. The Middle East lives inside us, as we redefine ourselves, we redefine the Middle East."*

The company has presented work in Los Angeles, Washington D.C., New York, and Cairo, Egypt. Golden Thread receives play submissions from around the globe and is frequently host to visiting artists from the Middle East through the US State Department and the Kennedy Center's exchange programs. An active contributor to Theatre Communications Group's international efforts and Theatre Without Borders, Golden Thread's year-round schedule consist of the ReOrient Festival of short plays; a comprehensive Outreach Education Program; plus commissions, tours, and partnerships with esteemed co-presenters. In 2010, Golden Thread partnered with the San Francisco International Arts Festival to co-present the highly acclaimed Syrian troupe, Al-Khareef.

## **ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES**

**TORANGE YEGHIAZARIAN** (Playwright, 444 DAYS) is the Founding Artistic Director of Golden Thread Productions where her latest play, 444 DAYS will be premiered in 2013. Torange received the 2012 Gerbode-Hewlett Playwright Commission Award to write ELLINGTON'S ISFAHAN, and is under commission by the Islamic Cultural Center of Northern California to write THE FIFTH STRING: ZIRYAB'S PASSAGE TO CORDOBA, both slated to premiere in 2014. Her short play CALL ME MEHDI is included in the anthology "Salaam. Peace: An Anthology of Middle Eastern-American Drama," TCG 2009. She directed the world premiere of STUCK by Amir Al-Azraki and VOICE ROOM by Reza Soroor in ReOrient Festival 2012. Her articles on contemporary theatre in Iran have been published in The Drama Review (2012), American Theatre Magazine (2010), and Theatre Bay Area Magazine (2010). Born in Iran and of Armenian heritage, Torange holds a Master's degree in Theatre Arts from San Francisco State University.

**BELLA WARDA** (Director) Iranian born Berkeley resident since 1980, is a founding member of the Darvag Theater group since its inception in 1985. She has acted in and directed Darvag productions as well as worked with other Bay Area theater groups. Since its founding, Bella has collaborated with Golden Thread Productions both as an actor and director; acting credits include A STATE OF INNOCENCE by Naomi Wallace (ReOrient 2005), A GIRL'S WAR by Joyce Van Dyke (2008), and directing the World Premiere of Naomi Wallace's NO SUCH COLD THING (ReOrient 2009).

**Jeri Lynn Cohen\*** (Laleh) has originated roles throughout the Bay Area - performing at ACT, Aurora Theatre, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Campo Santo, Eureka Theatre, A Traveling Jewish Theatre, Magic Theatre, Marin Theatre Company, San Jose Stage Company, and she has toured internationally with both Word for Word Performing Arts Company and The San Francisco Mime Troupe. She is a Charter Member of Word For Word Performing Arts Company where she has appeared in over a dozen of their critically acclaimed productions, most recently celebrating their 20th Anniversary of theatrical and literary collaboration with the premiere of Zona Gale's "In Friendship".

**Sheila Collins** (Olivia) is quite proud to be making her Golden Thread Productions debut. *444 Days* is Torange's wonderful creation but this production is truly a collaboration between artists who respect one another and Sheila is delighted to be a part of such a process. Since relocating to San Francisco three years ago, Sheila has acted in several short films, a PSA (in English and Spanish) and performed most recently in a interactive production as part of the Queers Arts Festival in *Shafted: The Blaqxploitation Project*. Prior to that she appeared as Addie in a Tides Theatre production of *The Little Foxes*, and read the role of Tituba in *Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, Or the *Devil Made Me Do it*, as part of the play reading series produced by the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre. Prior to San Francisco, Sheila portrayed Ruth in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Joan in *The Guys*, Crooks in *Of Mice and Men*, Yenta in *Fiddler on the Roof*, Nancy in *Oliver!*, Grace Farrell in *Annie*, as well as several roles in *The People Speak*, among others. As always, Sheila thanks her husband, Mark, for his unwavering support and encouragement.

**Olivia Rosaldo-Pratt** (Hadyeh) A Bay Area native and UC Berkeley graduate, Olivia is thrilled to be making her Golden Thread debut in *444 Days*. She was last seen in Crowded Fire's *The Bereaved*. She has performed with Portland's Sojourn Theatre, Seattle's Mandala Institute, and at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Locally she has worked with Crowded Fire Theater, New Conservatory Theatre, Quixotic Players and Central Works.



**Michael Shipley\*** (Harry) is excited to be working with Golden Thread on *444 Days*. He has performed with many Bay Area and regional theaters including the Missouri Repertory Theatre, American Players Theatre, Aurora Theatre Company, Marin Theatre Company, Sacramento Theatre Company, and the Utah Shakespearean Festival. Favorite past productions include: Dave in *The Typographer's Dream* (Encore Theatre Company), Pretty Boy Floyd in *Purvis* (Campo Santo), and *A Life in the Theatre* (Aurora Theatre Company). Michael recently directed Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* and was the founding Text and Voice Director for the Great River Shakespeare Festival in Minnesota. He holds an M.F.A. in acting from the American Conservatory Theater and is a member of Theatre Bay Area.

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## **FOR CALENDAR EDITOR:**

### **2 Play Pass**

The 2 Play Pass includes admission to *444 DAYS* and *URGE FOR GOING* on any date, EXCEPT Opening Nights.

Z Below - 470 Florida Street, San Francisco CA 94110 – Capacity 73

All events run between October 17 – December 8, 2013

2 Play Pass

\$45 Adult General

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### World Premiere

### **444 DAYS by Torange Yeghiazarian**

Directed by Bella Warda

**Political intrigue and family secrets mingle in this tangled tale of love, betrayal and espionage.**

Z Below - 470 Florida Street, San Francisco CA 94110 – Capacity 73

October 17 – November 3, 2013

Performances are Thursdays–Saturdays at 8pm; Saturdays and Sundays at 3pm

OPENING NIGHT: Saturday, October 19<sup>th</sup> at 8pm

(Running time approx. 90 min)

Thursdays	\$10 In Advance and \$Pay What You Can at the Door
Friday Evenings	\$30 Adult General and \$25 Stu/Snr/TBA Members
Saturday Matinees	\$25 Adult General and \$20 Stu/Snr/TBA Members
<u>Opening Night</u>	<u>\$45 Adult General and \$40 Stu/Snr/TBA Members</u>
Saturday Evenings	\$35 Adult General and \$30 Stu/Snr/TBA Members
Sunday Matinees	\$25 Adult General and \$20 Stu/Snr/TBA Members

Please bring your student ID or TBA Membership card when you pick-up your tickets at Will Call.

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High-res jpgs are available through [goldenthread.org](http://goldenthread.org)

Interviews with the Artistic Director and key directors can be arranged by contacting Bijan Ghiasi [Bijan@goldenthread.org] of Golden Thread Productions.

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Photos Available for Download at: <http://www.goldenthread.org/gallery/444-days-5/>  
To download, open picture like in new tab and save.





## 444 DAYS Historical Background



A U.S. hostage blindfolded and with his hands bound, was displayed to the crowd outside the U.S. Embassy in Tehran by Iranian hostage-takers, Nov. 9, 1979.

On November 4, 1979, Students Following the Imam's Line captured the American Embassy in Tehran and took its occupants hostage. 66 Americans were initially taken. 52 of them were held for 444 days.

The revolution that toppled the Iranian Monarchy in 1979 resulted in the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Shah (the Monarch) left Iran in January 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini arrived in February 1979, and the American Embassy was taken over in November 1979. The Shah died in July 1980. Jimmy Carter was president of the United States at the time. The hostages were released on January 20, 1981, the Inauguration Day of the new president, Ronald Reagan.

Eight years of war with Iraq followed; the bloodiest conflict in Iran's recent history, which further isolated Iran. Iran's "Reformist Movement" began with the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997. During his two terms, Khatami spearheaded Iran's economic reconstruction, liberalization of cultural and educational institutions and advocated for "Dialogue of Civilizations." Khatami appointed Massoumeh Ebtekar as Iran's first female Vice President. Ebtekar was known as "Mary" during the hostage crisis; she was the international press spokesperson for the Students Following the Imam's Line.

## Interview with playwright Torange Yeghiazarian

Torange Yeghiazarian's new play, 444 DAYS will premiere at Golden Thread Productions in San Francisco this October. Laine Forman uses the occasion to speak with Torange about her experience of moving to the US from Iran and the impetus for the play.

**LF:** What inspired you to write 444 DAYS? What was your experience of the Iranian hostage crisis?

**TY:** I was 14 when the hostage-taking at the US embassy in Tehran took place. The news on American media during that time and the images broadcast nightly of the demonstrators and the blindfolded hostages has been etched on my brain forever. In 2006, I took a playwriting workshop with Motti Lerner where he stressed the need to create situations where the characters become progressively more twisted. To me, the most twisted relationship was a hostage situation and I created a story where an ex-hostage and ex-hostage taker meet 25 years later. I knew there were women among the hostage-takers and I was curious about what that relationship might be like.

Then in 2010 I lived in Tehran for six months. During this time, I was really struck by the defiance of Iranian women. Their accomplishments, their presence in all social arenas and the strength they show in the face of significant daily challenges. The character of Laleh is very much informed by the experience of those six months. Her impassiveness is rooted in a survival strategy practiced daily in the streets of Tehran.

**LF:** Your play blends both historical facts along with fictional characters. What kind of research did you do for the play? What informed your choices?

**TY:** First I figured out the story I wanted to tell then I read accounts by the hostages and finally, I came across a memoir by one of the hostage-takers which really informed my understanding of the daily life inside the embassy complex. I also had to find a medical condition that fit the conflict I had in mind. That took a lot of research and consultation with a physician.

The basic story I had in mind was about two characters bound together by a child, representing a moment of passion between them, which they forever deny because of political conflict and nationalist concerns. To me, the current political situation in Iran is like a wound that has gangrened. I wanted a medical condition that would undeniably expose the two characters' past. I guess you put all of this together in a bowl and you end up with 444 DAYS.

**LF:** The two main characters are an ex-hostage and an ex- hostage taker who have fallen in love. What was your choice in creating this relationship?

**TY:** I'm drawn to impossible love affairs. The obstacles individuals must overcome to connect as human beings are hugely amplified when they are political enemies. I love focusing on the ways global situations actually impact our individual daily life. A love affair is a great way of personalizing the impact of war and political stalemate.

My own life changed completely as a result of a political conflict, the revolution in Iran. I was forced to live away from my homeland. I witnessed thousands of others dealing with the same situation. And those who stayed in Iran, the way their life was transformed as a result of the Islamization that took place in the years after the revolution. To me, those who say politics is somebody else' issue, are either blind or in denial. I feel like politics impacts every moment of my life.

**LF:** What are some of the challenges writing about a historical moment especially when dealing with a subject many of your audiences will have lived through? Why is this play important now? What do you



hope audiences will take away?

**TY:** I want the audience to focus on the story being told on stage. I don't want them to constantly be wondering if so and so REALLY did something or not? So the challenge becomes balancing fact with fiction. How do I make characters inspired by real people and events inspired by real events fictional enough so that the audience pays attention to and connects with what they are watching on stage? It's a constant back and forth. At the same time, there are benefits to using real events when the audience already has a sense of that history, the conflict and the weight of the circumstances being presented on stage.

**LF:** As the Artistic Director, was it intentional that your season has two female playwrights? How were these plays selected, and why?

You're asking this because of the recent attention to gender inequity in theatre, right? At Golden Thread we have historically hired and produced more women than men. It's not intentional; it just so happens that the best artists and playwrights tend to be women today. And we're not afraid of showing that. At the same time, I do look at the balance of a season, in terms of gender, ethnicity, dramatic content. But when you only produce two full-length plays per year, you have little leeway in offering variety.





## About Golden Thread

**Golden Thread Productions – Organizational Biography.** 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.

**MISSION.** 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 work builds cultural bridges by engaging the community in an active dialogue. 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.

**HISTORY AND PROGRAMMING.** Founded in 1996 by playwright and director Torange Yeghiazarian, Golden Thread has been a pioneer in Middle Eastern-American theatre and is widely acknowledged for the excellence and innovation of its programming. The company's debut production was *OPERATION NO PENETRATION, LYSISTRATA 97!*, an adaptation of the classic Greek comedy in which Palestinian and Israeli women unite to force men into signing a peace treaty. Other highlights include *LOVE MISSILE*, an original musical (2003); *BENEDICTUS*, a collaboration of Iranian, Israeli, and American artists (2007); *ECSTASY | A WATERFABLE*, Denmo Ibrahim's ensemble-generated play inspired by a Sufi fable (2009); and the first Middle East America commission *NIGHT OVER ERZINGA* by Adriana Sevahn Nichols (2011). Golden Thread's offerings include full-length productions; the ReOrient Festival of short plays; the staged reading series New Threads; and a robust education program, including teaching residencies, curriculum-based student performances, and the Fairytale Players, a touring ensemble that performs children's stories from the Middle East at schools, libraries, and festivals.

**NATIONAL IMPACT.** The Middle Eastern-American perspective is given more urgency in the larger context of the United States' relationship to the Middle East since September 2001. As such, Golden Thread has made a deliberate effort to have a national presence as a facilitator of conversations about this important region. In 2008, Golden Thread, in partnership with Lark Play Development Center (NYC) and Silk Road Rising (Chicago), launched Middle East America (MEA): a National New Plays Initiative in 2008. The Initiative awards \$10,000 to an American playwright of Middle Eastern heritage for the development and production of a new play. In 2009, Theatre Communications Group (TCG) published the first-ever anthology of Middle Eastern-American drama, which described Golden Thread as "the fountain-head of Middle Eastern-American theatre and the generative force behind this major and growing new voice in American Theatre." In 2012, Golden Thread artistic associate and the 2011 MEA winner Yussef El Guindi was awarded the prestigious Steinberg Prize for Best New Play. Golden Thread has supported El Guindi's career from the very beginning with numerous productions, including *BACK OF THE THROAT* (2005), *JIHAD JONES AND THE KALASHNIKOV BABES* (2008), and *LANGUAGE ROOMS* (2011).

**GLOBAL REACH.** Golden Thread's work is borderless and reaches beyond the United States. The organization receives play submissions from around the globe and is frequently host to visiting artists from the Middle East through exchange programs of the US State Department and the Kennedy Center. An active contributor to Theatre Communications Group's international efforts and Theatre Without Borders, Golden Thread continues to identify ways to provide opportunities for international artistic exchange, increase the presence of American theatre artists and their work abroad, and facilitate the presentation of work by international artists in the U.S. To this end, Golden Thread has hosted artists from the Middle East at the TCG National Conference and presented their work in San Francisco. Golden Thread's global reach is enhanced by an active presence on the internet (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) and evidenced by visits to the company's website from over 100 countries.



**CONSTITUENCY.** Golden Thread provides a link between Middle Eastern and non-Middle Eastern communities and an environment in which different Middle Eastern communities interact. Our education programs annually reach 3,000 youth and families. 60% of our mainstage audience is female; 70% is under 50; and 40% self-identify as Middle Eastern many of whom rarely attend other theatre. As a result, Golden Thread's programs expose our substantial non-Middle Eastern audience members to the genuine voices and alternative perspectives of the region and its worldwide diaspora, while simultaneously serving Middle Eastern audiences who rarely encounter meaningful reflections of their own culture and experience in popular media and performing arts.

**EDUCATION.** By providing theatre education rooted in Middle Eastern arts and literature, Golden Thread's Education Program addresses the parallel needs of Middle Eastern youth and families for self-affirming performing arts programming as well as the broad community's need for a deeper understanding of the Middle East in its rich diversity. Additionally, the program equips arts educators with much needed overview of the region and its culture. Golden Thread's multifaceted Education Program has three main elements: The Fairytale Players - Inspired by popular performance traditions in the Middle East, the Fairytale Players employ epic story-telling, physical theatre and circus arts techniques in creating original plays based on stories from the Middle East. Past productions include *THE GIRL WHO LOST HER SMILE*, *THE PRINCESS AND THE MIRROR*, *NASRUDIN'S MAGNIFICENT JOURNEY TO SAMARKAND*, and *RUMI X 7 = TALES FROM THE MASNAVI*. Student Outreach Performances of Main Stage Productions – To enrich students' understanding of main stage productions which help humanize the Middle East; Golden Thread invites students to attend performances at the theatre. Study guides provide historical, cultural and political context and link to California Education Standards. Teaching Residencies - Golden Thread teaching artists lead classes in performance and dramatic writing. Informed by the teachers' diverse immigrant background and multi-lingual skills, curriculum is customized to the specific needs of the host schools and cultural organizations.

**REORIENT FESTIVAL & FORUM.** The ReOrient Festival of short plays, now presented triennially was inaugurated in 1999 to present alternative perspectives of the Middle East, showcasing the diversity of artistic voices and styles from the region, and gathering various segments of the Middle Eastern community together with the non-Middle Eastern community for an evening of distinctive – yet shared – narratives. ReOrient has served as a springboard for the careers of top Middle Eastern-American playwrights such as Youssef El Guindi and Betty Shamieh. In addition, the ReOrient Festival has introduced audiences to significant dramatic works from the Middle East by authors that are rarely produced in the US such as Sadegh Hedayat, Fatma Gallaire, Tawfiq Al-Hakim, among others. While promoting the voices of the Middle East, young and old, the festival offers an opportunity to non-Middle Eastern playwrights to explore the region as a topic. The ReOrient Festival has premiered works by such distinguished American playwrights such as Naomi Wallace, Eric Ehn, and Israel Horovitz. In fact, the majority of plays submitted to the festival continue to be by non-Middle Eastern writers who appreciate the thoughtful and professional support that the festival offers. Since 2009, in celebration of the tenth anniversary of the festival, Golden Thread has organized ReOrient Forum, a weekend-long convening in San Francisco aimed at expanding the dialogue on theatre, the Middle East, and current hot topics that illuminate the region's relationship with the US.

**NEW PLAY DEVELOPMENT.** Golden Thread ensures the discovery and development of new playwrights and plays through three distinct programs. The Kimia program facilitates collaborations that explore rare themes and/or bring together unlikely creative partners. For example, *BENEDICTUS* (2007) was an international collaboration among Iranian, Israeli and American artists to create a play exploring the political stalemate among the three nations. *ECSTASY | A WATERFABLE* (2008) was a commission to Denmo Ibrahim to create an ensemble-generated performance inspired by a Sufi fable. Middle East America, A National New Plays Initiative (MEA) is designed to help create a pipeline of high quality plays by Middle Eastern American playwrights. MEA offers \$10,000 commission, two years of development and productions in San Francisco and Chicago. *NIGHT OVER ERZINGA* (2011) by Adriana Sevahn Nichols and *THE MUMMY AND THE REVOLUTION* (2014) by Youssef El Guindi have been developed through this program. *Islam 101* is an initiative to create dynamic, colorful and family-friendly plays inspired by Islamic art and philosophy that help create positive images of Islam for youth and build cultural bridges between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. *RUMI X 7 – TALES FROM THE MASNAVI* Conceived by Hafiz Karmali and *THE FIFTH STRING: ZIRYAB'S PASSAGE TO CORDOBA* by Torange Yeghiazarian are the current plays in this initiative.