

**World Premiere of *Isfahan Blues*
from African-American Shakespeare
Company and Golden Thread Productions**



The two admired and beloved theater companies come together for a world premiere play inspired by Duke Ellington's 1963 tour of Iran. *Isfahan Blues* imagines the relationship between a famous American jazz musician and a beautiful and charismatic Iranian film star, if they disappeared on a road trip to the city of Isfahan. Written as a memory play by Torange Yeghiazarian (the real-life daughter of famous actress Vida Ghahremani, who will star in the play alongside AASC artistic director L. Peter Callender), *Isfahan Blues*, directed by Laura Hope, features an original score from Bay Area jazz maestro Marcus Shelby, and dramaturgy by Nakissa Etemad.

May 2 - May 24, 2015; Friday and Saturday at 8pm; Sunday Matinee at 3pm; Buriel Clay Theatre

Tickets: \$15-\$34.00 available through

[African-American Shakespeare Company](#) or [Golden Thread Productions](#)

March 3 2015, San Francisco - Golden Thread Productions joins forces with the African-American Shakespeare Company to present the world premiere of *Isfahan Blues*, a new memory play from Torange Yeghiazarian inspired by Duke Ellington's 1963 tour of Iran. This is the first time that the African-American Shakespeare Company is producing an original play that is not part of the classical canon/repertoire. With an original score from Marcus Shelby, *Isfahan Blues* is what might be called—to use a musical term often employed by Ellington himself—a “fantasia” on a situation that poses the question: what would've happened if the Duke's right hand man, the composer and lyricist Billy Strayhorn made the decision to go off on a road trip with a charismatic, beautiful and popular Iranian actress of the time?

Actor and African-American Shakespeare Company Artistic Director L. Peter Callender will play the lead character, Ray Hamilton, while Bella, the actress and nightclub owner, will be played by beloved Iranian actress Vida Ghahremani, and as the young Bella, by Sofia Ahmad. Ghahremani is the real-life actress who owned a nightclub in 1963 Iran; playwright Torange Yeghiazarian is her daughter.

It is a rare occasion that AASC, a celebrated African-American arts organization in the Bay Area, is partnering with Golden Thread Productions, the first American theatre company focused on the Middle East. Through this unique partnership of two theaters of color, the play was created in a collaborative process between playwright

Torange Yeghiazarian and the creative team consisting of actress Vida Ghahremani, actor L. Peter Callender, dramaturg Nakissa Etemad, director Laura Hope, and composer Marcus Shelby.

Isfahan Blues offers an alternative vision to today's political stalemate between the US and Iran. This production aims to shed light on a little-known historical moment when a uniquely American art form inspired generations of young Iranian musicians. Among other things, the play poses what would it be like for Ray Hamilton—a black musician and lyricist inspired by the life and character of Billy Strayhorn—had he decided to leave the tour and strike out on a road trip to the legendary city of Isfahan with Bella? And what was it like for an Iranian woman in the early sixties to touch a third rail in her own culture, by insisting on her own independence?

As is well documented, Billy Strayhorn had an affinity for glamorous women, and glamorous women had an affinity for him; Ray shares this affinity, as does Bella who is drawn to him as well. According to the playwright this was inspired by Strayhorn's relationship with the American actress, singer and nightclub performer, Lena Horne, who was candid in saying he was the love of her life, though he was openly gay at a time when that was not an easy thing to be.

"Bella and Ray are drawn to each other, partly because they are both protected and "masked" by the strong men in their lives," says Yeghiazarian. "Ray by Duke Ellington who provided protection in virulently anti-gay times, and Bella, who has similar relationship with her husband, who though he is controlling, allows her the protection she needs—while often taking credit for her accomplishments, something it has been argued, Ellington did with Strayhorn as well."

2015 is the centennial of Billy Strayhorn. In addition to such iconic titles such as *Take the 'A' Train*, *Lush Life* and *Satin Doll*, he is responsible for the languid and beautiful composition, *Isfahan*, recorded by Ellington as part of *The Far East Suite*, which can be found [here](#).

Topicality

The relationship between Iran and the United States has taken a turn recently with negotiations on disarmament and the potential normalizing of relations much in the news. The fabled Iranian city of Isfahan was featured in an NPR story on the opening up of the country to tourists. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2015/02/18/387149018/you-are-invited-isolated-iran-seeks-foreign-tourists>

Original Score

The original score for *Isfahan Blues* is from Marcus Shelby. Because of copyright issues, none of Ellington or Strayhorn's actual compositions can be employed, so Shelby faces the exciting challenge to write in their tone. Much like the writer of the movie *Selma*, who had to write original speeches for Martin Luther King, as copyright laws made using MLK's own words impossible.

Creative Team

Playwright: Torange Yeghiazarian

Original Music: Marcus Shelby

Director: Laura Hope

Dramaturg: Nakissa Etemad

Featuring: Vida Ghahremani & L. Peter Callender

Note: *Isfahan Blues* was written in collaboration with the creative team; links to their bios can be found [HERE](#)

What: Isfahan Blues

Presented By: The African-American Shakespeare Company and Golden Thread Productions

Where: Buriel Clay Theater

When: May 2 - May 24, 2015;

Time: Friday and Saturday at 8pm; Sunday Matinee at 3pm

Tickets: 15-\$34.00 available through [African-American Shakespeare Company](#) or [Golden Thread Productions](#)

Note for Press: There is a public preview on Friday May 1; opening night is Saturday, May 2.

About Torange Yeghiazarian (Playwright, Golden Thread Artistic Director)

Torange Yeghiazarian is the founding artistic director of Golden Thread Productions where she has devoted her professional career to building cultural bridges with the Middle East through innovative and provocative theatrical productions. Torange's plays include: *The Fifth String: Ziryab's Passage to Cordoba*, *444 Days*, *Dawn at Midnight*, *Abaga*, and *Waves*. Her short play *Call Me Mehdi* is included in "Salaam.Peace: An Anthology of Middle Eastern- American Drama" published by Theatre Communications Group in 2009. Torange has collaborated extensively in creating new work including with playwright Hal Gelb and puppeteer, Janaki Ranpura in the musical, *The Love Missile*; and with the team of Iranian, Israeli and American artists responsible for *Benedictus*. Her articles on contemporary theatre in Iran have been published in *The Drama Review*, *American Theatre Magazine*, *Theatre Bay Area*, and *HowlRound*. Born in Iran and of Armenian heritage, Torange holds a Master's in Theatre Arts from San Francisco State University.

About Vida Ghahremani (Actress)

Vida Ghahremani began acting in films as a teenager in Iran, where she established the standards of stardom. Some of her Iranian film classics include, *Chahar Rah Havades*, *Toofan Dar Shahr Ma*, *Faryad Nimeh-shab*, *Farda Rowshan Ast*, *Atash va Khakestar*, *Eshgh va Entegham*. In the US, she appeared in the award-winning film by Wayne Wang, *One Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, and *The Stoning of Soraya M* by Cyrus Nowrasteh. Vida has been an artistic associate with Golden Thread since its first production, *Operation No Penetration*, *Lysistrata 97!* Other performances include *The Love Missile* (with Sofia Ahmad as her daughter), *Abaga* and *Nine Armenians*. Ms. Ghahremani is a member of the Screen Actors Guild.

About L Peter Callender (Actor; AASC Artistic Director)

Named "Most Valuable Player of Bay Area Theater, 2014" by the San Francisco Chronicle, **L. Peter Callender** has worked professionally as an actor for over thirty years, and more recently as a director and writer. A native of Trinidad, West Indies, he received his formal training in the theater at the Juilliard School in New York City; Webber/Douglas Academy in London, England; Mask Technique with Julie Taymor, and The Suzuki Technique with The Tadashi Suzuki Company in Toga-mura Japan. He has appeared on Broadway, off-Broadway, in regional theaters across the US, and has performed internationally in Japan, England and France. His New York Credits include: Tom/Jamaican Waiter in *Prelude to a Kiss* (Circle Rep. and at the Helen Hayes Theater on Broadway directed by Norman Rene); Off-Broadway; *Roscoe in Black Eagles* (directed by Ricardo Kahn at Manhattan Theater Club), *Casbeque in The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (directed by George C. Wolfe at the Public Theater); Caliban in *The Tempest* (directed by Julie Taymor at Classic Stage Company); Curio/Ensemble in *Twelfth Night* at the Delacorte Theater directed by Harold Guskin). Currently, Mr. Callender is an associate artist at the California Shakespeare Theater— now in his 21st season. Some roles at CalShakes include: The title roles in *Julius Caesar* and *Cymbeline*, *Oberon in A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*, Orsino in *Twelfth Night*, Leonato in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Polixenes in *A Winter's Tale*, Navarre in *Love's Labor's Lost*, Bolingbroke in *Richard II*, Duke Solinus in *Comedy of Errors*, Laertes in *Hamlet*, Dukes Frederick and Senior in *As You Like It*, La Feu in *All's Well That ends Well*, Dr. Chasuable in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Vincent Crummels in *Nicholas Nickleby*, and Roebuck Ramsden in *Man and Superman*. He also teaches Acting Shakespeare Level One — for adults — each fall for CalShakes.

About Nakissa Etemad (Dramaturg)

Nakissa Etemad is a professional dramaturg, producer, director, and French translator based in San Francisco. She has worked in the field of dramaturgy for over twenty years, including full-time posts as

Dramaturg and Literary Manager for Philadelphia's The Wilma Theater, San Jose Repertory Theatre, and Resident Dramaturg and Artistic Associate for San Diego Rep. Ms. Etemad has fostered 23 professional world premieres of plays and musicals and has dramaturged over 80 productions, workshops, and staged readings with such writers as Tom Stoppard, Arthur Miller, Lynn Nottage, Polly Pen, Marcus Gardley, Charles L. Mee, Luis Valdez, Octavio Solis, Doug Wright, Julie Hébert, Dael Orlandersmith, Chay Yew, Katori Hall, Lillian Groag, and Culture Clash. Ms. Etemad has also provided dramaturgy for Arena Stage, Alliance Theatre, Arizona Theatre Company, O'Neill Music Theater Conference, La Jolla Playhouse, Perseverance Theatre, The Lark, French Consulate SF, The Cutting Ball Theater (as Resident Dramaturg for Marcus Gardley's ...*and Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi*, Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* and *Victims of Duty*), Bay Area Playwrights Festivals, Crowded Fire, Z Space, Alter Theater, and the inaugural season of Berkeley Rep's The Ground Floor, among others. Recent projects include: Dramaturg for four multi-city world premieres of Marcus Gardley's *the road weeps*, *the well runs dry*; Dramaturg & Writer in Collaboration with Margo Hall & composer Marcus Shelby on the world premiere *Be Bop Baby: A Musical Memoir* at Z Space. The Executive VP Freelance and Regional VP Metro Bay Area for Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA), she studied at the Université de Paris III and holds an MFA in Dramaturgy from UCSD & certificates from Le Cordon Bleu, London.

About Laura Hope (Director)

Dr. Laura Hope is an Associate Professor of Theatre at Loyola University New Orleans, where she also the co-chair of the interdisciplinary minor in Women's Studies, and serves as faculty for the interdisciplinary minors in African and African American Studies and Middle East Peace Studies. She has worked from coast to coast as director, dramaturg, and actor, and is a contributing dramaturg at the California Shakespeare Theatre. Favorite directing projects include *El Nogalar* by Tanya Saracho, *In the Blood* by Suzan-Lori Parks, and *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett at Loyola University, *Blackbird* by Adam Rapp at The Elm Theatre in New Orleans (four Big Easy Theatre Award nominations), and *Show and Tell* by Anthony Clarvoe at Symmetry Theatre Company (SF). Before relocating to New Orleans, she served as the Resident Dramaturg for the California Shakespeare Theater, and the Literary Manager and Festival Director for Magic Theatre in San Francisco. Since 2002, she has been an Artistic Associate with Golden Thread Productions. Ashgate Press will publish Dr. Hope's book on dramaturgy entitled *Feminism and Dramaturgy: The Road Less Traveled*, co-written with Dr. Philippa Kelly, next year. In October 2013, she directs her edit of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, set in 1935.

About Marcus Shelby (Composer)

Named one of the "Top Ten Most Influential African Americans in the Bay Area," Marcus Anthony Shelby (composer & music director) is an award-winning composer, bandleader and bass player. He has collaborated extensively with multidisciplinary artists and arts organizations composing original scores and commissions for the stage, dance and film. The Marcus Shelby Orchestra tours nationally and internationally and performs locally at the San Francisco Jazz Festival, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and the Intersection for the Arts.

About the African-American Shakespeare Company

The award-winning African-American Shakespeare Company (AASC) was established in 1994 by professional theater artists from the American Conservatory Theatre as an alternative answer to the "Color Blind Casting" initiative that began in the early 90s. While this initiative temporarily changed the diversity on stage, African-American Shakespeare Company noticed color blind casting was ignoring these artists' rich cultural heritage and not making the most of their dynamic, cultural vibrancy that actors of color could bring to classical works. Moreover, "mainstream" classical theaters seem to lack the ability to truly attract diverse audiences. African-American Shakespeare Company inspired to highlight artist of color's dynamic cultural vibrancy within classical productions.

African-American Shakespeare Company's work has received honorary acknowledgement from San

Francisco's City and County's former Mayor Gavin Newsome (now serving as Lieutenant Governor); recently awarded The Paine Knickerbocker Award in 2014 for Outstanding Achievement for a Theater Company by the San Francisco Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle; and a Community Partner Award from University of San Francisco's Leo T. McCarthy Center for outstanding collaboration in providing quality Service-Learning program.

The African-American Shakespeare Company is funded in part by Shakespeare for a New Generation, a national program of the National Endowment for the Arts in cooperation with Arts Midwest; San Francisco Arts Commission, Grants for the Arts, California Arts Council, The San Francisco Foundation, Columbia Foundation, Fleishhacker Foundation, Zellerbach Family Foundation, Macy's, The Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation, The Hewlett Foundation, University of San Francisco Engage Program, and Silicon Valley Foundation

About Golden Thread Productions

Golden Thread produces passionate and provocative plays from and about the Middle East that celebrate the multiplicity of its perspectives and identities. We are a developmental catalyst and vibrant artistic home to artists at various stages of their careers. We bring the Middle East to the American stage, creating treasured cultural experiences for audiences of all ages and backgrounds.

Through our work, we aim to create a world where the common human experience supersedes cultural and political differences. We define the Middle East broadly and inclusively not by geographical boundaries, but as the shared and evolving experience of the people who have been touched by its tales, melodies and aromas throughout history. The Middle East lives inside us: as we redefine ourselves, we redefine the Middle East.

###