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GOLDEN THREAD PRODUCTIONS MIDDLE EAST CENTER STAGE BY TORANGE YEGHIAZARIAN, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

“Golden Thread’s plays are like coming home, it’s like seeing my own family on stage, the love and passion side by side with the anger and frustration.”

At [Golden Thread Productions](#), we have been producing plays by playwrights of Middle Eastern background for nearly fifteen years. The desire to create a home for Middle Eastern artists is rooted in a very personal need to share our distinct narratives and diverse aesthetics with American audiences. The company began by producing my plays but soon we discovered other Middle Eastern and Middle Eastern-American artists of exceptional talent whose



work was not receiving the kind of national attention it merited. Playwrights such as Yussef el Guindi, Betty Shamieh and Karim Alrawi are among the early discoveries of Golden Thread. Locally, we invested in developing the work of Denmo Ibrahim and supported the careers of

young artists such as Evren Odcikin and Sara Razavi. In 2009, when we auditioned for the tenth anniversary of *ReOrient Festival of Short Plays*, actors came from around the country. Dina Moussawi came all the way from London. “When I heard about *ReOrient Festival*, I knew I just had to be a part of it,” Dina said.



The festival is unique in that multiple short plays from various countries are presented in one evening. It makes for very interesting conversations. “Golden Thread is able to facilitate the kind of meaningful dialogue politicians have failed at for centuries,” an audience member commented after a post-play discussion. Another one described our work as, “Golden Thread’s plays are like a coming home, it’s like seeing my own family on stage, the love and passion side by side with the anger and frustration.” These accomplishments gave me a deep sense of pride. More and more Middle Eastern artists were being recognized and more and more theatres were producing plays related to the Middle East. Great strides had been made and I couldn’t help but feel that Golden Thread was at the center of it all. In fact, I secretly wondered if the work of the company was still

vital. In 2010 I took a six-month sabbatical to ponder this and other deep questions. My return from my sabbatical in September 2010 coincided with the Quran-burning saga in Florida in response to the “threat” of a mosque



being built near Ground Zero. Having experienced the warm hospitality and boundless generosity of friends and family in the Middle East, I was painfully reminded of just how inaccurate perceptions of the Middle East in America are. I remembered a quote from San Francisco Foundation’s Post 9/11 Civic Engagement Fund, “Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern and South Asian communities are among the fastest growing ethnic groups in California and in the Bay Area,” yet we are still gripped by fear and continue to keep our distance. A fresh look at California statistics



shows that despite their great economic success, Middle Eastern immigrants remain insular in

their cultural activities; art and educational programming specifically designed to meet the needs of these communities is minimal. Young people in these communities are particularly vulnerable to the effects of racial and religious prejudice and the dearth of positive images of their heritage in influential popular media sources. Disaffection from family and ethnic community ties results from this lack of understanding of and pride in cultural roots. Similarly, misconceptions about these cultures lead to violence and stereotyping which shatter the harmony of the community as a whole.



We had established a youth education program back in 2008 to address this need through a multifaceted and self-supporting group of activities. But in September 2010, I really felt the need to invest in strategic partnerships that help reach Muslim youth and families. We found the ideal partner right here in Oakland, the [Islamic Cultural Center of Northern California \(ICCNC\)](#). Their visionary leaders were in the middle of a rebranding campaign to better communicate the center’s mission to



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“celebrate Islam through culture, arts and education.”

Thanks to funding from the California Arts Council’s [Creating Public Value Program](#), Golden Thread is embarking on a groundbreaking partnership with ICCNC to



bring theatre to ICCNC's community and for both organizations to reach out to all Bay Area residents, young and old, who are hungry for visionary arts programming that reflects the diversity, complexity and beauty of Islam and the Middle East. The program includes creative writing and performance classes at the Center with the aim of nurturing the young voices in the community and helping them feel confident about their identity and culture. By reaching out to the local downtown Oakland neighborhood, the goal for the classes is to bring together members of Muslim and non-Muslim



community to interact in a safe and creative space where they can develop a deeper understanding of each other.

Golden Thread’s program at ICCNC also includes the presentation of original plays inspired by Islamic arts and ideas. We call this program *Islam 101*; it is our way of sharing Islam’s playful side. Led by international artist, Hafiz Karmali who received his theatre training at Carnegie Mellon and American Repertory Theatre, the first production in the *Islam 101* series is *Rumi X 7 = Tales from the Masnavi*, slated for three performances at the Islamic Cultural Center on November 18th and 19th. This dynamic and engaging performance is a fusion of eastern music, dance and poetry with western circus arts and commedia dell arte. *Rumi X 7 = Tales from the Masnavi* is performed by an ensemble of actors, acrobats, dancers and musicians. *Rumi X 7 = Tales from the Masnavi* is Golden Thread’s first holiday show and one we believe is a welcomed addition to the usual mix.



(2010), by Vida Ghahremani; *KZV Theatre Camp, Student* (2005), by Torange Yeghiazarian.

Golden Thread Productions receives funding from the California Arts Council's [Creating Public Value Program](#), which supports arts organizations in rural and underserved communities, and is managed by Lucero Arellano larellano@cac.ca.gov.



Identity is a tricky thing. No one wants to be boxed in and reduced to a label: Muslim, Middle Eastern, Minority, Immigrant... No one label describes everything about an individual. Our community is increasingly mixed yet our children are surrounded by language and imagery that isolate and alienate them. We deserve better, and so do future generations. Golden Thread Productions with the support of funders like the California Arts Council aims to present a richer, more diverse image of Islam. We aim to create cultural bridges among communities and opportunities for civic engagement and cultural exchange. For us at Golden Thread, positive transformation happens one play at a time.

Photo subjects and credits (in order presented):
The ensemble, Ecstasy/ a waterfable (2008), by David Allen Studio; *Julián López Morrillas and Garth Petal, ReOrient* (2008), by Gohar Barseghyan; *Caroline Zola and Valeria Weak, ReOrient* (2005), by Ted Grover; *Brian Trybom Neva, Marie Hutchinson, Terry Lamb, and Juliet Tanner, Night Over Erzinga* (2011), by David Allen Studio; *Jehan, Boy and The Sun, Arab Cultural Festival* (2010), by Vida Ghahremani; *The ensemble, Island of Animals* (2006), by Ted Grover; *Italian Painters, Arab Cultural Festival*