

September 29, 2017

Dear Producers and Artistic Directors of the American Theatre:

We know how difficult it is to produce a play in this day and age. Between the budget, the timeline, fundraising, and your artistic priorities, the last thing you need is to find yourself caught in an unwitting debate about representation. We feel your apprehension. After all, you cannot be expected to singlehandedly correct centuries of racism and misogyny.

Our priority is for more plays written by Middle Eastern American playwrights to be produced across the U.S. We want this not only because it's good for us as a nation to hear from the people who've been vilified for decades, but because these are American plays, representing the perspectives and experiences of vastly diverse communities. We want you to enjoy even more success as producers and artistic directors by choosing timely and potent plays that will excite your audiences. We're here to help you!

Play selection: There are many Middle Eastern and Muslim American playwrights on the New Play Exchange. Many *excellent* plays are listed there in a range of styles and cast size. Plays with humor, warmth, and three-dimensional characters that reflect your audience's lives more than you may imagine. You like comedies? We have them. You like heartwarming family dramas? We have them. You like sharp political commentaries? We have them. You need a two-hander due to budget constraints? We have them. You need an epic adventure with a big cast for your students? We have them. You need an experimental play? We have them. You need a historical play? We have them.

Casting: Some of you are lucky enough to live in a city populated with Middle Eastern American theatre talent: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Minneapolis. That said, there are Middle Eastern American theatre artists working in communities throughout the U.S. Look for them, including reaching out to performers who create outside our established theatre systems. They've probably already reached out to you. Bottom line: You all should be working with more Middle Eastern American actors, directors, dramaturgs, and designers.

If you have a budget to hire out-of-town actors, we are more than happy to offer referrals. If you do not have the budget to hire out-of-town actors, and after a rigorous search still haven't found any Middle Eastern American actors in your local community, then it's okay to cast more widely in the interest of telling the story. Keep in mind that peoples of the Middle East are quite diverse and have deep historical and cultural ties to peoples of South Asia, Africa, Mediterranean Europe, and Latin America. Reach out to actors in those communities next. We share many experiences, values, and cultural practices.

Basically, don't let casting challenges deter you from producing Middle Eastern American plays altogether. Telling more Middle Eastern American stories has to be first priority. Discuss your casting options with the playwright and together arrive at decisions that honor his or her intentions. Additionally, make sure you have one or more individuals on your production team

that can provide cultural competency. Which leads us to...

Cultural competency: Cultural competency is the ability to fully dive into the cultural context of a particular story. In the case of Germany and Russia, most American producers feel familiar enough with the history and culture that gave birth to Chekhov and Brecht. This is more difficult when producing a play dealing with Afghanistan, Syria, or Egypt. In these cases, we recommend you work with a cultural consultant---someone who has embodied knowledge of and lived experience with the community in which your play lives, and more importantly, someone who is also familiar with the creative process. The job of the cultural consultant is not to police the creative process or product. The job of the cultural consultant is to provide creative options plucked from within the actual cultural practices, history, aesthetics, and sensibilities of the community in which the play is set. We are happy to serve as or recommend culturally competent dramaturgs and artistic consultants.

Agency is both important and necessary. Cultural competency without agency, the power to impact decision-making, is meaningless. On the one hand, artists from marginalized communities should not be put in a position to constantly represent their community's experience or validate its representation. On the other hand, you must ensure the artistic and creative agency of the members of the marginalized community involved in your project. It is easiest when you are able to include lead artists (director, designer, dramaturg) from the community in your creative team. When this is not possible, the playwright and cultural consultant must feel fully empowered and supported to impact decision-making.

Facilitating the conversation: Plays dealing with Islam or the Middle East are often perceived as politically charged. Bringing together people of different backgrounds and facilitating a respectful, honest, and meaningful conversation is not easy. Stay focused on the play! Your job is not to solve global conflicts or theological disputes. Your job is to tell a good story to the best of your ability. Keep the conversation focused on the play you are producing and the story you are trying to tell. The conversations will often begin from our differences but invariably end with our commonalities.

It's hard enough to produce a play in today's political climate. The last thing anyone needs is controversy overshadowing the work and the process, not to mention the fundamental motives or abilities of the producers.

We're here for you. We've been doing this for a long time. Use us as a resource. Use us as community builders. We are happy to share best practices. We are happy to recommend plays and artists that suit your season needs.

Sincerely Yours,

Torange Yeghiazarian, Founding Artistic Director, [Golden Thread Productions](#)

Jamil Khoury, Chief Programming Officer & Mission Trustee, [Silk Road Rising](#)

P.S. We recognize and acknowledge the colonial history of the terms “Middle East” and “Middle Eastern.” We adopt the terms because they are widely understood, and because more geographically specific terms such as “West Asia” and “North Africa” are inadequate and tend to elicit confusion. While we regret having to use terms that place England at the center of the world, we draw strength from defining “Middle Eastern” broadly and inclusively in order to embrace the multiplicity of ethnic and religious identities that span Southwest Asia, North Africa, Central Asia, the Caucasus, parts of Mediterranean Europe, and our Diaspora communities. We understand our respective backgrounds in terms of rich pluralism and interconnectedness. We also define “America” and “American” in the broadest possible ways to include the continents of North and South America.

Furthermore, at this time in history, it’s important that we include American Muslims, of all cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds, as members of our Middle Eastern American communities.

P.S.S. This writing owes much to the humor and intelligence of Justin Simien’s [*Dear White People*](#) and Ralph B. Peña’s “[Diversity for Dummies](#)”