

A Middle Eastern American Theatre Artists Bill of Rights

We the artists of Middle Eastern American heritage and culture, in order to form a more just and inclusive American Theatre, adopt the following as self-evident truths:

1. We have the right to tell our own stories in our own words without bearing the burden of representing an entire community's experiences.
2. We have the right to define our own cultural identities, free of coercion, policing, and stereotypes, and to embrace our myriad identities simultaneously.
3. We have the right not to conform to preconceived notions of our cultural identity and to resist political and social judgements in favor of stories that reflect our own truths and understandings.
4. We have the right to bring complicated, nuanced, and layered interpretations to the characters we play.
5. We should not be expected to perform preconceived notions of our identities, nor acquiesce to hyper-sexualized or systemically violent representations of our bodies.
6. We have the right to examine "negative" and/or "silly" aspects of our communities, religious traditions, and identity politics without being censured or held up as a model.
7. We have the right to tell stories that criticize certain policies of the U.S. government or specific Middle Eastern governments without being accused of being anti-American, racist, or self loathing.
8. We have the right to tell all stories, including those that are not necessarily about Middle Eastern identity.
9. We have the right to remind artistic decision makers of the following:
 - a. Do not single us out to validate or authenticate all content as it relates to our cultural heritage.
 - b. Hear our concerns as they relate to our identities with the understanding that we are all here to serve the play.
 - c. Do not assume that one Middle Eastern artist's participation in a project automatically lends approval to all culturally-specific choices that are made.

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.

This document was prepared by Jamil Khoury, Chief Programming Officer & Mission Trustee of Silk Road Rising (Chicago), and Torange Yeghiazarian, Founding Artistic Director of Golden Thread Productions (San Francisco).

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