

ARABIAN NIGHTS

BERKELEY REP

NOVEMBER 19, 2008

**YOUR TREASURE LIES BURIED IN THE GARDEN OF YOUR HOME / YOUR
FUTURE LIES IN YOUR DREAMS**



Our Island-Life Event Coordinator managed to score Tix for Press Night at the Berkeley Rep for the long anticipated return of Mary Zimmerman to the Bay Area with her latest collaboration, The Arabian Nights.

Opening Night tends to feature glitches and problems and cold starts that get ironed out as the season progresses, so we tend to avoid them, despite the buffet and cheap champagne.

Sitting there we noted all the best and brightest and most savage of the Bay Area Critics slouching in their seats all around. You can always tell a

Professional Writer by their cynical demeanor and their looks of jaundiced dissatisfaction with virtually everything.

In this case, we have to say, this production exploded from the start with no-miss energy and visually stunning presentation that grabbed each and every audience member by the lapels within the first 45 seconds to shake them all awake and not let go for a second until the gasping Scherazade, about to couple with the murderous king who holds her fate, shouts from under the king, "Intermission!"



The audience enters to the Thrust Stage area, a unique space in that the audience surrounds the performance area on three sides, to see a bare lightbulb hanging over a pile of white drop cloths in front of a distressed concrete back wall with exposed wiring and pipes. Two men dressed in antique middle east costume enter with *djembes* (West African hand drums) and a vaguely Middle East filigree lamp one man hangs over the bare lightbulb.

After a hesitation, the two launch into furious drumming as the entire cast of some fifteen person enters at a furious run to unveil the stage and construct the setting with Oriental carpets, pillows and divans under a hail of tossed pillows. This frenetic and startling beginning works well to set the tone of magic and setting, which morphs over the course of the play from vaguely "Oriental" to Persian, to Iraq, to, in the final moments of the play, present day Baghdad with a final, terrifying image.



According to the Wicki, "One Thousand and One Nights (Arabic: *Kitab 'alf layla wa-layla*; Persian: *Hezar-o yek šab*) is a collection of stories collected over many centuries by various authors, translators and scholars across the Middle East, North Africa and Indian subcontinent. These collections of tales trace their roots back to ancient and medieval Arabic, Persian, Indian, Egyptian and Mesopotamian literature. In particular, many of tales were originally folk stories from the Caliphate era and the Sassanid-era Pahlavi work *Hazar Afsan* (lit.

Thousand Tales). Though the oldest Arabic manuscript dates from the 14th century, scholarship generally dates the collection's genesis to around the 9th century.

What is common throughout all the editions of The Nights is the initial frame story of the ruler Shahryar (from Persian, generally meaning king or sovereign) and his wife Scheherazade (from Persian, generally meaning townswoman) and the framing device incorporated throughout the tales themselves. The stories proceed from this original tale; some are framed within other tales, while others begin and end of their own accord. Some editions contain only a few hundred nights, while others include 1001 or more "nights."



That's the Wikipedia. Our own take is that during the 18th Century, the tales became robbed of any relevance and became mere "entertainments", while the original stories possessed a bit more pointed satire as well as moral

cautionary fables. But over the course of well over a thousand years, the collections developed lives of their own with some well-loved tales, such as Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves of purely Western English origin.

One figure who figures largely in the tales, and especially in Mary Zimmerman's version is an actual historical personage, the Harun al-Rashid; also spelled Harun ar-Rashid. He was the fifth and most famous Abbasid Caliph. He was born in Rayy, near Tehran, Iran, and lived in Baghdad, Iraq (March 17, 763 – March 24, 809).

He ruled from 786 to 809, and his time was marked by scientific, cultural and religious prosperity. Art and music also flourished significantly during his reign. He established the library Bayt al-Hikma ("House of Wisdom").

Since Harun was intellectually, politically and militarily resourceful, his life and the court over which he held sway have been the subject of many fictional tales: some are factual but most are believed to be fictitious. One story known to be true was the story of a mechanical clock sent to Charlemagne, which the Frankish court took to be a powerful talisman of magic because of its regular sounds and amazing things it would do upon the hour.



Zimmerman's take here, since obviously one cannot present nearly a tenth of the stories on stage in any reasonable amount of time, is to select, arrange and orchestrate several of the lesser well known stories so that the first section features the most ribald and frankly erotic stories that manage to captivate the murderous king who kills a virgin bride each night in memory of being cuckolded by his first wife. The idea is that killing the bride on the first night skips by any possibility of betrayal.

Along comes Scherazade (Sophia Jean Gomez) who beguiles the King Shahryar (Ryan Artzberger) into postponing the murder until daybreak brings temporary relief.

The Second Act is far more thoughtful and "elegiac" section which features a remarkable exegesis of the Koran and Islamic thought as "Sympathy

the Wise" comes to challenge the wisest scientists, philosophers and theologians of Calif al-Rashid's court.

Also, it is during the second act that the accumulation of repeated details and placenames, now familiar to us in the West for reasons other than this story, develop powerful resonance. "I searched for him far and wide throughout the land. In Anbar, and Basra, and Mosul, and finally, Baghdad did I search for him . . ." . One character says, looking for the author of the "Forgotten Song", one of the more profound tales from the First Act.

"Oh man, know that the author of the song is not the writer. Not even your own songs. The author is God and you are but the instrument . . .".



In fact, this production, with all of its violence and vibrant sexual couplings is one of the most morally infused productions presented at Berkeley Rep, with stern reminders to Christian and Moslem alike to heed to their true precepts rather than illusory pride-infused deceptions which lead only to stupid violent acts.

As Sympathy, the victor of the intellectual debate contest refuses the offer of marriage from the Calif, she says over her shoulder, "Kings don't need Sympathy."

The final, chilling image presented after the incantation following the formal marriage of Scherazade and the now humanized King Shahryar ("And the nights of Baghdad became bright as day.") Involves no "lights down" but a tangled heap of bodies with the faint sounds of an air raid siren dying away on the wind.

Despite this dry-eyed stare at reality as it is today, Zimmerman presents an essentially optimistic Theatre in which stories present a transformative power that can heal and lead to change. Her dramatic style is steeped in Commedia dell Arte and Grutowski's tableaux arrangements, and over time the regular Company of actors on which she draws have become at ease with the unconventional approaches to rehearsal and production development.

Gomez, who presented a marvelously complex Athena, at times bratty, at times wise, at times kind, at times cruel in *Argonautika* fills out her various rolls as Sheherazade and beast of burden. And we have the always enjoyable Allen Gilmore returning as Scheherezade's father, Ishak of Mosul and other characters, including one hysterically funny cameo as a madman member of an acrobatic troupe.



Kudos to the various members of the cast who, by report, were required to learn and then perform musical instruments they had never seen before. Especial mention of Jesse Perez who consistently turned in very funny performances as a randy pastry cook, a frustrated robber, and a wildly inventive contender improv-ing a story about his life in an attempt to secure ownership over a bag found on the ground.

The section in which the ensemble acts out the stories of five tales simultaneously in a interwoven layered babel of sound and motion was pretty impressive as well.

In short, Zimmerman has returned once again with a triumph that possesses all of the good qualities we look for in excellent world-class theatre. In addition to plenty of memorable "moments", the whole is delightfully engaging,

cathartic, magical, musical, thoroughly engrossing, visually sumptuous, morally instructive, and transformative in the best way.

What else would anyone want from theatre?

Mary Zimmerman, Adapter and Director
Daniel Ostling, Scenic Design
Mara Blumenfeld, Costume Design
Andre Pluess & The Lookingglass Ensemble, Original Composition & Sound Design
T.J. Gerckens, Lighting Design
Michael Suenkel *, Production Stage Manager
Cynthia Cahill *, Stage Manager
Stephanie Klapper, Casting
Amy Potozkin, Casting
Jeremy Bloom, Assistant Director
Jennifer Pardilla, New York Casting Assistant
Carrie Virginia Lee, Assistant to Ms. Klapper & Ms. Pardilla

Cast

Ryan Artzberger - King Shahryar
Allen Gilmore - Scheherezade's Father / Ishak of Mosul / Ensemble
Sofia Jean Gomez - Scheherezade
Stacey Yen - Dunyazade / Azizah / Ensemble
Barzin Akhavan - Harun al-Rashid / Ensemble
Louis Tucci - Jafar / Sheik al-Fadl / Ensemble
Noshir Dalal - Madman / Greengrocer / Ensemble
Pranidhi Varshney - Slave Girl / Ensemble
Melina Kalomas - Perfect Love / Ensemble
Evan Zes - Sheik al-Islam / Abu al-Hasan / Ensemble
Nicole Shalhoub - The Jester's Wife / The Other Woman / Ensemble
Jesse J. Perez - The Pastrycook / Robber / Ensemble
Alana Arenas - Butcher / Sympathy the Learned / Ensemble
Ramiz Monsef - Clarinetist / Sage / Ensemble
Ari Brand - Poor Man / Boy / Ensemble

Photos courtesy of Kevin Berne