

پیلگریمز

By YUSSEF EL GUINDI
Directed by SHIRLEY SEROTSKY

MUSA & SHERI
IN THE NEW WORLD



STUDY GUIDE
SEASON FIVE



Voices from a Changing Middle East Festival

Introduction

“Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it.” – Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*

Independent, intercultural, entertaining, and uncensored, Mosaic Theater Company of DC invites students into the realm of socially-relevant and transformational theatre with the hopes of inspiring, challenging, and empowering the next generation. Our education department strives to put the power of the future back into the hands of students by flipping the narrative on what it means to attend the theatre. We strive to show students that theatre can be collaborative and communicative so that they may engage in meaningful dialogue, thoughtful introspection, and critical observation of the world in which we all live.

Written by Hannah Grillot

MOSAIC THEATER COMPANY *of*

PRESENTS

PILGRIMS MUSA & SHERI IN THE NEW WORLD

By Yussef El Guindi | Directed by Shirley Serotsky

Set	Nephele Andonyadis
Lights	Brittany Shemuga
Costumes	Danielle Preston
Sound	Roc Lee
Properties	Michelle Elwyn
Dramaturg	Salma S. Zohdi
Dialect Coach	Zach Campion
Stage Managers	Laurel VanLandingham*
Assistant Director	Drew Keavany

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Characters



AHMAD KAMAL* as

Musa

Egyptian immigrant from Cairo.



RACHEL FELSTEIN* as

Sheri

American woman, currently working as a waitress.



FREDDIE LEE BENNETT* as

Abdallah

Musa's roommate on Hajj.



SANAM LAILA HASHEMI as

Gamila

Muslim American woman with roots to Egypt.



GERRAD ALEX TAYLOR* as

Tayyib

Musa's friend who sells suitcases in the city.

*Denotes member of The Actors Equity Association

Synopsis

From the Egyptian-American winner of the Steinberg New American Play Award comes a romantic comedy about Muslim and American identity full of unexpected twists. Musa, a new immigrant from Egypt, picks up Sheri, a boisterous and quirky waitress, after her shift. A night of improbable passion turns into an extended labyrinth of cultural assumptions upended.

About the Artists



Yussef El Guindi (Playwright) Born in Egypt, raised in London, and now based in Seattle, Yussef El Guindi's work frequently examines the collision of ethnicities, cultures, and politics that face Arab-Americans and Muslim Americans. El Guindi holds an MFA in playwriting from Carnegie Mellon University and has worked as resident playwright at Silk Road Theatre Project; literary manager for Golden Thread Productions; and playwright-in-residence at Duke University. He is the recipient of many honors, including the Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award and the 2010 Middle East America Distinguished Playwright Award. El Guindi's most recent productions include *The Talented Ones* at Artists Repertory Theatre in Portland (Santa Barbara Independent Indy Awards); *Threesome* at Portland Center Stage, ACT, and at 59E59 (winner of a Portland Drammy for Best Original Script); *Pilgrims Musa And Sheri In The New World* (winner of the Steinberg/American Theater Critics Association's New Play Award in 2012; and the 2011 Gregory Award) also at ACT, and at Center Repertory Company (Walnut Creek, CA) 2013; and *Language Rooms* (Edgerton Foundation New American Play Award), co-produced by Golden Thread Productions and the Asian American Theater Company in San Francisco; at the Wilma Theater in Philadelphia (premiere), and at the Los Angeles Theater Center. Other productions: *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love And Combat* was produced by Silk Road Theater Project and won the M. Elizabeth Osborn award. His play *Back Of The Throat* (winner of L.A. Weekly's Excellence in Playwriting Award for 2006), *Pilgrims Musa And Sheri... Jihad Jones And The Kalashnikov Babes*, *Such A Beautiful Voice Is Sayeda* and *Karima's City* have been published by Dramatists Play Service. *Ten Acrobats In An Amazing Leap Of Faith*, *Collaborator*, *Threesome*, and *The Talented Ones* have been published by Broadway Play Publishing Inc. *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes Of Love And Combat* is published in the anthology "Four Arab American Plays" published by McFarland Books. In January 2019, Bloomsbury will publish "Selected Works By Yussef El Guindi." Currently a Core Company playwright member at ACT in Seattle.



Shirley Serotsky (Director) is a director, dramaturg, artistic leader, educator and programmer; she recently moved to Ithaca, NY to serve as the Associate Artistic Director/Education Director at the Hangar Theatre. Shirley has been involved with Mosaic Theater as a dramaturg and public programmer since 2018, and is thrilled to now be here directing this beautiful play. She has taught and mentored students in the fields of directing, acting, dramaturgy, play analysis, theatre appreciation, new play development and auditioning. Selected directing credits include: *The How and the Why*, *Another Way Home*, *The Call*, *Yentl*, *The Argument*, *The Hampton Years*, *The History of Invulnerability*, *The Moscows of Nantucket*, *Mikveh* (Theater J); *Rapture*, *Blister*, *Burn* (Round House Theatre); *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *The Jungle Book* (Adventure Theatre); a 21/24 Signature Lab Workshop presentation of *The Break* (Signature Theatre); *God of Carnage*, *Other Life Forms*, *Working: The Musical* (Keegan Theatre); *Blood Wedding* (Constellation Theatre); *A Man, His Wife, and His Hat* and *Birds of a Feather* (which won the 2012 Charles MacArthur Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding New Play, The Hub Theatre); *Juno and the Paycock* (Washington Shakespeare Company); *Reals*, *Five Flights and Two Rooms* (Theater Alliance); *Crumble* and *We Are Not These Hands* (Catalyst Theater); *References to Salvador Dali Make Me Hot* (Rorschach Theater, for which she received a 2007 Helen Hayes nomination for outstanding direction); *Sovereignty* (The Humana Festival of New Plays). Training: BFA, The University of North Carolina School of the Arts; MFA, Catholic University.

Curriculum Connections

DC PUBLIC SCHOOLS Taken from the DCPS Scope and Sequence Matrix for the School Year

Grade Level 9 (UNIT 3): Identity in Literature

In this unit, students will study the Harlem Renaissance, focusing on the ways in which writers and artists of this movement used art to represent and shape cultural identities. Students will read and study poems, works of visual art, and the novel *Passing* by Nella Larsen. Students will complete an extended research project in which they will select a topic, use library resources to gather information, and synthesize their research into a project with a real-world application.

Grade Level 10 (UNIT 3): Voices from the War

This unit continues to explore the nuances of author's craft, thinking about the blurred lines that can occur between fiction and nonfiction texts. Similarly, students will wrestle with the idea of leadership in the face of moral/ethical dilemmas. In particular, they will consider the ways that perspectives about the Vietnam War can vary based on experience and situation. They will view video clips about the historical events (primarily the Gulf of Tonkin incident) that fueled U.S. participation in the Vietnam War, engage in a close viewing and close reading exercise, examine techniques used to construct meaningful photographs, poetry, and art that were created during and in response to the Vietnam War, and read texts focusing primarily on text structure, characterization, and language to create a literary argument that responds to the culminating argument prompt.

Grade Level 11 (UNIT 3): Mobilizing the Masses

This unit continues student engagement with the concept of leadership through the examination of one of America's most profound leaders, Malcolm X. Specifically, students are led through an exploration of this historic figure, reflecting on his thoughts, beliefs, and actions and how they changed over the course of his life. To more fully understand the context of his thinking and what he was challenging, students begin the unit by learning about cultural hegemony and narrative and how they can be used as tools of oppression. Students will apply their understanding of hegemony and begin connecting the creation of historical, racist narratives to the texts they are closely reading, considering questions like the essential questions below.

Grade Level 12 (UNIT 3): Power of Words

How do texts and other forms of media implicitly and explicitly shape our point of view or opinion about a topic or event? The goal of this unit is to provide students with opportunities to read widely about important social issues, conduct research about an issue important to them, and then develop and present an argument about an issue.

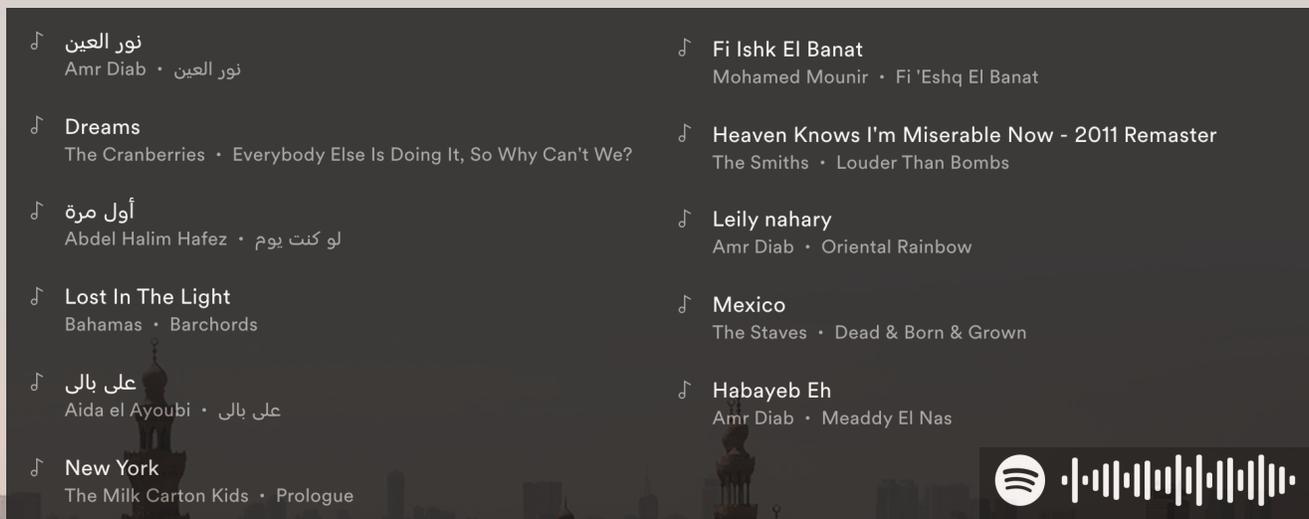
Activity Before the Play

EDUCATORS: To best prepare your students for your trip to Mosaic Theater Company of DC, consider these Pre Show Activities that you can do together in class.

IN DISCUSSION: BEFORE THE SHOW

What does it mean to be home? What does it mean to be connected to a culture and a place that isn't the one you currently live in? These are the questions that Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in a New World ask of us. Reflect on your experiences of home and your homeland. Now try and imagine you are living outside of this experience. How would your worldview change? How would it not?

MUSIC LISTENING: Take a listen to our generated Spotify playlist to help set the tone and the mood for the play: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4DP3IWDQciwSExSmW0Ngmt?si=waALZBjZTk6WmX09Ns12DQ>



The image shows a Spotify playlist interface with a dark background. The playlist contains ten tracks, each with a musical note icon, the track title, and the artist/album information. The tracks are:

- نور العين (Nur al-Ain) by Amr Diab
- Dreams by The Cranberries
- أول مرة (Uwla Marra) by Abdel Halim Hafez
- Lost In The Light by Bahamas
- على بالي (Ala Baly) by Aida el Ayoubi
- New York by The Milk Carton Kids
- Fi Ishk El Banat by Mohamed Mounir
- Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now - 2011 Remaster by The Smiths
- Leily nahary by Amr Diab
- Mexico by The Staves
- Habayeb Eh by Amr Diab

At the bottom right of the playlist interface is the Spotify logo and a visualizer graphic.

Discussion Themes

Cross Cultural Romance

Interfaith Relationships

Defining Home

Immigration: Then and Now

Keeping the Faith: Observance and Assimilation

America's Cities as Cultural Centers

Representing Islam Onstage

Dramaturgical Essay

The Way Into Pilgrims by Salma S. Zohdi

Born in Egypt, raised in the UK, and now residing on the West Coast in the US, critically acclaimed playwright Yusef El Guindi is an avid and attentive examiner of the friction between different cultures, identities, and politics—especially those that face Arabs and Muslims residing in the US. Inspired by voices and audio that surround him, El Guindi started writing the first scene of *Pilgrims* Musa and Sheri in the New World inspired by the sound of a woman complaining of climbing the stairs. “I knew she was accompanying a guy up to his apartment,” says the playwright “and that it was around 2 AM. Immediately I wondered who these people were, and what they were doing at that time of the night. With the answers came the trajectory of the play.” Being a keen observer of the human condition, especially that of Muslim-Americans, El Guindi’s concerns as a citizen found their way into his characters’ needs and circumstances.

Published in 2014, *Pilgrims* highlights the liminal emotional space that occupies the daily lives of Muslim immigrants when making a new home away from home. And while the play was first written in 2012, it addresses hyper-contemporary themes like immigration, self-imposed estrangement, displacement, and pilgrimage that are still very much alive and true to this day.

Under the direction of Shirley Serotsky, Mosaic Theater Company’s production takes place sometime around the year 2012—a year removed from the 2011 Egyptian Revolution and the Arab Spring; a moment where post-revolution despair started slowly sinking in, though hope was still prevalent. During this time the country was divided. It was a time when the map of the future was unclear; where many Egyptian norms were being questioned, and the Muslim Brotherhood was rising to power. A majority of conflicted Egyptians started reexamining their own interpretations of religiosity and tradition, some leaning closer and others deviating—yet none of them had the proper tools or resources to tread this spiritual journey sensibly. This is the world from which Musa migrates.

Not much of a strict Muslim observer, Egyptian cab driver Musa is drawn to Sheri, an boisterous American waitress, creating this romantic modern-day intercultural fable. Despite having conflicting preconceptions of pre-marital sex, different perceptions of gender dynamics, and disparate languages (emotional and spoken), Musa and Sheri get immersed in their secluded world with ease, willingness, and hope. However, this rosy sensation

doesn't last long, and the conflicted duo soon become entangled in a web of their emotional and cultural baggage.

Through Musa's unconventional cross-cultural union with Sheri, and the way it impacts his small Muslim immigrant community, El Guindi subtly sheds light on the juxtaposition between Musa's religious observance and of those who surround him. Specifically in the character of Gamila, El Guindi depicts an American-bred Muslim women, conventional yet determined, who believes in the fundamental need for a marital arrangement to be religiously blessed. Her attachment to this religiosity is in stark relief to many assimilated, US-raised Muslim immigrants. Gamila holds on tight to her religious practices—more so than the play's non-American Muslim immigrants who've recently relocated from predominantly Muslim countries.

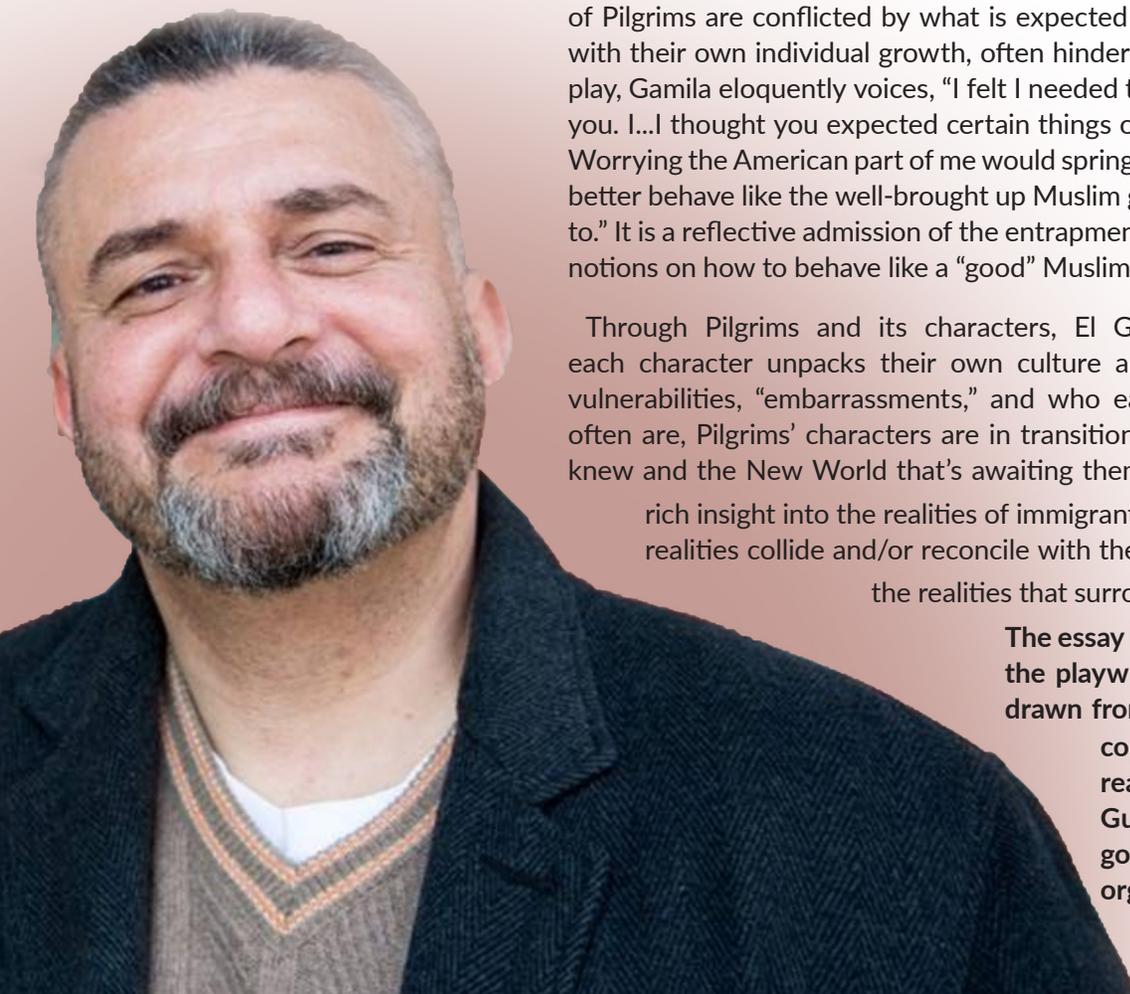
On the other hand, there is also Musa's roommate, Abdallah, who migrates from Sudan, a country afflicted by the escalating conflicts in Darfur. Not far from them, and also of African-Muslim roots, comes their friend Tayyib from Somalia, leaving behind a world of famine and insurgence of the jihadist fundamentalist group, El-Shabab. The three Sunni-Muslim men, each an immigrant in his own merit, move to the US to embark on their journeys towards a life that would uplift their conditions, facilitating an ascension to their true potential.

As indicated in the play's title, each character seeks pilgrimage, albeit in different ways. They tell themselves different stories in order to survive their pilgrimage, and consequently, they each get drawn to a fate that is specific to their individual narrative. Both Musa and Sheri seek spiritual pilgrimage. Gamila seeks a homeward bound pilgrimage. Tayyib seeks a pilgrimage that brings him together with other sojourners. And Abdallah seeks a religious and enlightening path where he journeys to perform Hajj—a pillar of Islamic practice and a literal pilgrimage that occurs during the Islamic month of Dhu al-Hajj to the holy city of Mecca. Their pilgrimages aren't devoid of commonalities: each character is in a transitional state of immigration and in search of a home, including Sheri. But a specific common thread connects all the Muslim characters' emotional voyage in the play and that is overcoming the challenges of being a Muslim immigrant.

Despite the limited time they've each been on US soil, the Muslim immigrants of Pilgrims are conflicted by what is expected of them and how that collides with their own individual growth, often hindering their autonomy. Late in the play, Gamila eloquently voices, "I felt I needed to behave a certain way around you. I...I thought you expected certain things of me. I felt trapped in that too. Worrying the American part of me would spring out and shock you. And that I'd better behave like the well-brought up Muslim girl that perhaps you were used to." It is a reflective admission of the entrapment imposed by her preconceived notions on how to behave like a "good" Muslim woman.

Through Pilgrims and its characters, El Guindi strikingly exposes how each character unpacks their own culture and reconciles with their past, vulnerabilities, "embarrassments," and who each aspires to be. As humans often are, Pilgrims' characters are in transition between the Old World they knew and the New World that's awaiting them. El Guindi's Pilgrims provides rich insight into the realities of immigrants and refugees, and how those realities collide and/or reconcile with the expectations imposed on and the realities that surround them.

The essay is heavily primed by input from the playwright Yussef El Guindi himself, drawn from his answers to an interview conducted via email. For a full read of the interview with El Guindi discussing his work, please go to our website (mosaictheater.org/pilgrims)



Activity After the Play

SCENE STUDY

In this scene we see engaged couple, Musa and Gamila, discussing the cultural norms that they believe are expected of each other. Gamila has found out that Musa has been unfaithful to her when she was in Egypt working out the details of their marriage with Musa's family.

GAMILA

Oh shut it! Damn it! - Why? Why are you picking her? Of all people. I don't get it. She's an improvement? Because of what? the sex? Because she puts out?

MUSA

No!

GAMILA

What else could it be? It must be one helluva blow job she's giving you.

MUSA

Stop it!

GAMILA

What else then?

MUSA

Because I can be what I want with her! For first time. I can't live in this world you want me to.

GAMILA

What world?

MUSA

This world. The one you always - and my family as well, what they want. It's like I'm in it always, up to my eye-balls, and I can't see anything else. Why did I - why did I come to this country? So I can stay in this same world? I am like a fish in a bowl and what has changed? I look out on America in my taxi instead of Cairo but it is still the same fish bowl I am in, the same story. What is the point?

GAMILA

What are you talking about?

MUSA

What my family expects of me, what you - the way you look at me, I feel I am supposed to be someone I'm not!

GAMILA

What someone?

MUSA

What you expect of me! Like I am - ...Why you want to marry me? Because you think you keep in touch with back home? With our religion? I am a terrible Muslim. I go to the mosque to see friends, not God. Of course God. But God is not happy with me. I fail him too.

GAMILA

What are you saying, that you can't - ? What?

MUSA

Ana mishader atnafas! - I can't breathe in this - this life that I know we will have. How it will be, the routine, it is very clear. What we will have in this life together, the things that we will say is muhim - important. You want to keep in touch with your roots? I don't want roots! I want things I know nothing about. I want a life where I don't know where it goes. With us, the story it would be - it would be very clear - and customs and tradition and family. And this is who we are and where we started and this is where we are going. All the way to when they bury me. I don't want the rest of my life to be what I know. This story where I know beginning, middle and end. Yes, Sheri is not you. She is very strange and perhaps wrong for me, but maybe that is what I need. The wrong woman. Maybe I need the wrong woman in my life.

(From above, a thud, then:)

MAN'S VOICE

(From above.)

Hey! Wrap it up down there! Some people are trying to sleep!

MUSA

(Looking up.)

I do not believe it. They are telling us to shut up?

(To the man above.)

You shut up!

MAN'S VOICE

(From above.)

You shut up!

MUSA

You shut up! The loudest people in the building telling us to keep quiet! That is too much! Go to hell!

MAN'S VOICE

(From above.)

You go to hell!

GAMILA

(Slight beat.)

This is how you've felt?...Since I've known you?

MUSA

No. Only....No.

GAMILA

Why didn't you say anything?

MUSA

Because I didn't know how I felt.

GAMILA

(Slight beat.)

Now you get in touch with how you feel?...Where were you these past ten months?

MUSA

Better now than many years into marriage with kids and too much to walk away.

(Slight beat.)

GAMILA

(Half to herself.)

This is how you've felt?

MUSA

I didn't know. Until...recently.

(Slight beat.)

GAMILA

If you'd gotten a clue just one month earlier. Before your mother and me sat down like two generals figuring out how to do this wedding.

MUSA

I will - I will talk with her.

(A laugh from Gamila.)

What?...What is funny?

GAMILA

What you said....This is how I've sometimes felt with you. That you had these expectations of me.

I felt I needed to behave a certain way around you. I...I thought you expected certain things of me. I felt trapped in that too. Worrying the American part of me would spring out and shock you. And that I'd better behave like the well-brought up Muslim girl that perhaps you were used to.
(Slight beat.)

I probably did want to marry you to keep some link with back home. What's wrong with that?
It can get pretty lonely and confusing living here.

MUSA

I want confusing.
(Slight beat.)

GAMILA

You got it.
(Then:)

And just to be clear...I also found you not bad looking. You had that going for you.
It wasn't just some desire to keep in touch with back home. I do like you. Just to be clear.

MUSA

And I you.
(Beat.)

QUESTIONS:

What does this scene say about intercultural relationships?

Why do you think that Musa and Gamila feel constrained in their engagement to one another and how do these feelings differ? How are they the same?

MONOLOGUE STUDY

In this monologue, we see Musa's roommate, Abdallah, who is a Sudanese immigrant discuss his life since moving to America.

(The lit candles still flicker. Abdallah stands in a spotlight. He is dressed in the white robes of a pilgrim on a Hajj.)

ABDALLAH

(Accent.)

I do very well for myself here. Three years in this new country and I turn a poor boy from Khartoum, me, into a businessman with much cash, as thick as a deck of playing cards. With my English, a language I must say almost as beautiful as my own, which I learn before coming here, with this language, I quickly learn to figure out things as soon as I come to this new country with all its strange customs. Its different ways of doing things, and seeing the world. The different foods, the huge portions of food and the amazing size of buildings. As well as of course, to be honest, the fantastic cleavage of women I see everywhere. My God. Let me speak of this for a moment. What is in the water that so many women here are so admirable to look at. It gives me such pleasure to compliment a woman in English who passes

me by on the street. To say, “Good morning to you, beautiful” so she understands. The rest, I might say to myself in my own language. But to be able to compliment in the language of your hosts, it makes a difference. So, in general, I have no problem fitting in. And finding a job right away. Odd jobs: bus boy, dish washer, cleaning offices. I meet other people doing this, Sudanese, Koreans, Nigerians; and they recommend other jobs. Working at a grocery store, a laundromat. Meeting other nationalities, Guatemalans, Polish, Russians. I got to learn some Russian. I can say “piss off” in fluent Russian:

(In Russian.)

“Vati otsjuda”. And “kiss my ass” in Spanish:

(In Spanish.)

“Besame el culo” And “park that behind right here, baby”, in English. And in meeting all these people, I get to know them. And believe it or not, what they say about people is true, boring as it is: we are all basically, wonderfully the same. I think this is why there are so many quarrels. Because we see ourselves in the way other people act. And you know how hard we can be on ourselves. But that is not what I want to talk about, at least not in this way. I will talk of this by telling you how I got rich. Very rich. You see, in getting to know all these people, with the music of their different languages in my ear, I learnt all about the things they dream about and wanted. Services they need but don’t know how to get because their English is not so good. And in knowing so many people, I knew for instance that what Carlos was looking for, Dimitri had. Or what Nadif dreamed about getting cheaply I could arrange a special discount from Amina. And so on. Connecting people. For business. Becoming a middleman. Knowing how to do simple things for people who just arrive. And soon businesses learn of my skills and pay me to help with the immigrants who work for them. I make more money in this big city than I ever could in my home town. Arriving in a land filled with so many strangers, and enough strangeness in it it could make you cry sometimes, in spite of all this, I do great. And so I say, Abdallah, you have to give thanks to God. It is time you make the Hajj. And so I went. Happily. Because my heart had also been made rich by this journey. It made me feel so good that I could make such a difference in people’s lives....Unfortunately...the boat I was on, that was carrying me across the Red Sea to Mecca, was too small for so many people....And it sank.

(Lights fade out on Abdallah.)

FREE WRITING PROMPT:

Write your own monologue about an experience you’ve had outside your comfort zone. Think of the ways you made connections to the things around you even when outside your comfort zone, or imagine the ways that you could have made the situation more comfortable and familiar to you. At the end of your monologue reflect on what your biggest takeaway from this experience might have been.

Vocabulary

GLOSSARY/ARABIC TERMS

Ahlen: Hello

Alhamdu lillah: Thank God.

Ammar adeen: Apricot drink.

Ana asaf: I'm sorry.

Ana mishader atnafas: I can't breathe.

Argukee, laazem nitkallem: Please, let me talk.

Hamd'illah asalam: Welcome.

Inshallah: God-willing.

Inti magnooni: Are you crazy?

K'ahk: A cookie, very similar to Russian tea cookies.



Muhim: Important.

Moomkin nu'ad shwaaya: Can we sit for a moment?

Salaam 'alaykum: Peace be upon you.

DEFINITIONS

Hajj: The Hajj is a pilgrimage that occurs during the Islamic month of Dhu al-Hijjah to the holy city of Mecca. Every able-bodied Muslim is obliged to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their life.

Ka'bah: The Ka'bah, the main Islamic landmark also known as Baytullah (The House of Allah) is the first house built for humanity to worship Allah. It is located in Mecca in Saudi Arabia. The direction of the K'abah is where muslim pray towards all around the world. In the Hajj, pilgrims perform the ritual of Tawaf which

involves walking seven times counterclockwise around the Ka'bah.



Khartoum: Khartoum is the capital of Sudan.

Mecca: Located in the Hijaz region of Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of prophet Muhammad, a cave 3 km (2 mi) from Mecca was the site of Muhammad's first revelation of the Quran, and a pilgrimage to it, known as the Hajj, is obligatory for all able Muslims. Mecca is home to the Ka'bah, one of Islam's holiest sites and the direction of Muslim prayer, and thus Mecca is regarded as the holiest city in Islam.

Niqab: Covers more than the Hijab does, the niqab is a veil for the face that leaves the area around the eyes clear. However, it may be worn with a separate eye veil. It is worn with an accompanying headscarf.

Red Sea: The Red Sea is an inlet of water off of the Indian ocean flowing between Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.





The Mosaic Theater Company of DC

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