AWARD-WINNING “PILGRIMS MUSA AND SHERI IN THE NEW WORLD”
BY YUSSEF EL GUINDI HEADLINES 20th ANNUAL
VOICES FROM A CHANGING MIDDLE EAST FESTIVAL

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Mosaic Theater Company of DC’s #WOKESeason 5 rings in 2020 with a steamy romantic comedy of cross-cultural gravity.

Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World, winner of the Steinberg/American Theatre Critics Association Award for Best New Play opens the new year at Mosaic running Thursday, January 16, 2020 through Sunday, February 16, 2020, performing at the Atlas Performing Arts Center in Northeast DC. Opening night is Sunday, January 19 at 7:30 pm. It follows four preview performances, including a Pay-What-You-Can preview January 16, with limited PWYC Rush Tix available through January 19.

In Yussef El Guindi’s world, we are all making pilgrimage into the future, looking for our true selves in a challenging, promising land. Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World, part of Mosaic’s long-running Voices From a Changing Middle East Festival, is a romantic comedy about seeking new identity, the pull of our homelands, and the craving for liberation and tradition at one and the same time.

Placed in a modern American city on a set of suitcases engulfed by churning seas, the play looks at new American immigrants posing an age-old question: Do we cleave to safe choices or risk taking an exciting, sensual, romantic and experiential leap?

El Guindi presents us with a new set of protagonists, Musa (Ahmad Kamal), a Muslim-Egyptian, cab-driving immigrant not defined by politics or religious observance but by his personal desires and moral conflicts, along with Sheri (Rachel Felstein), a fiercely independent, intelligent, hardscrabble waitress working her own way through the city. Their first meeting is electric, sending their lives careening in new, dangerous directions. Musa absorbs the American frontier spirit from his dingy walk-up apartment, awakened to new possibilities by Sheri’s fierce charisma.

Complicating Musa’s evolution is the return of his Muslim-American fiancée, the poised and proper Gamila (Sanam Hashemi) who’s just visited Egypt to meet Musa’s famiy. Musa’s
global array of fellow service workers frame the surprises posed by this new world, as a friend and emissary from the beyond recalls a fateful pilgrimage to the Hajj in Mecca.

Notes longtime DC director, Shirley Serotsky, veteran of other Voices Festival productions (Mikveh) and newly appointed as Associate Artistic Director at the Hangar Theatre in New York, “Pilgrims Musa and Sheri brings an irreverent humor and no-holds-barred honesty into a shimmering love story about a cross-cultural relationship. I love how El Guindi creates human, flawed, and totally relatable characters to populate the worlds he conjures: we do not like everything that Musa and Sheri do by a long shot, but we understand them.”

Serotsky, who previously has directed workshop presentations of Yussef El Guindi’s work (Karima’s City and Such a Beautiful Voice Is Sayeda’s, based on the short stories of Egyptian author Salwa Bakr, for the 2012 Voices Festival) continues: “Sheri has a line in the play, speaking about Musa—who made his journey from Egypt to the US relatively recently, ‘He does remind me of the sheer chutzpah that must have carried my great-grandparents to come here. And then I start thinking that - when I’m watching Musa, that, yeah: I can go for something too. Be something different if I choose, you know.’ Every time I hear that line I think about my own great-grandparents and grandparents, who came to this country during the 3rd wave of immigration... And I don’t want to be naïve about this, because I know that the drop off of immigration in the 1920s happened because fear and bigotry flared up which instigated policies like quotas, and reactionary violence. But by the time I was growing up in the 70s and 80s, we celebrated this metaphorical melting pot (which was of course problematic in its own ways) but did seem to recognize our nation’s great potential as a place for reinvention and new beginnings. But that’s changed so drastically now; we’re living in a period dominated by fear and xenophobia, allowing the most prejudiced and small-minded among us to decide what it means to be an American. I reject those tendencies; and this play, El Guindi’s wildly optimistic story about migration and transformation, does as well.”

Playwright Yussef El Guindi tells interviewer Adam Symcowycz that Pilgrims Musa and Sheri “explores the emotional havoc that attends those who leave one country to try and make a home in another country....The baggage that one unavoidably lugs around in one’s travels, as well as the stuff you’re forced to leave behind. And how the absence of those things left behind often accrues an emotional weight of its own. A weird number is done on your psyche when you the find the familiar touchstones of your home country absent from your daily life. That is of course both thrilling and exciting, as well as overwhelming, and even terrifying at times. Sometimes, an emotional free-fall takes place, where nothing familiar remains for you to hold onto in times of crises. Truly, one becomes a stranger in a strange land; and one simply can’t create memories and comfort zones fast enough to break this fall.”

Cast

Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World stars a diverse ensemble of DC actors including Ahmad Kamal as Musa (Everybody, The Shakespeare Theatre; Oslo, Round House Theatre; Gloria, Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company [Helen Hayes nomination, Best Supporting
Actor]; and Mosaic’s The Return); Rachel Felstein as Sheri (Right to Be Forgotten, Arena Stage); Freddie Lee Bennett as Abdallah (Mosaic’s Unexplored Interior: This is Rwanda), Sanam Hashemi as Gamila; and Gerrad Alex Taylor as Tayyib.

Post-Performance Programming

As always and in advancement of its mission, Mosaic will host a series of post-show discussions exploring resonant themes present in Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World, featuring a diverse set of panelists. These free post-show discussions, beginning immediately after the performance. Panel topics and dates include:

January 16: Egypt in Mind and Memory: Liberation Stories
January 19: The Plays of Yussef El Guindi with Production Dramaturg, Salma Zohdi
January 23: Third Culture Kids | Keeping the Faith: Observance and Assimilation
January 25: Intercultural/Interracial Relationships
January 26: Defining Home: Local & Global – Internal & External
January 30: Intersectional Identity: Power and Privilege
February 1: Sheri & Gamela: Shifting Female Identities, American & Muslim Women
February 2: The Sacred and the profane in Love and Religion: A Feminist Perspective
February 6: Immigration Then & Now: Narratives & Policy Implications
February 8: The Pilgrimage: Hajj and The Journey
February 9: Islam & The West: With Ambassador Akbar Ahmad (invited)
February 13: Identity Baggage: What Do We Carry and How Do We Let Go?
February 15: Identity: Summation of Choices v. From Whence We Come?
And several Cast Talk-Backs following 11 am matinee performances on January 23 & February 13.

A full list of discussants and bios will soon be available at http://www.mosaictheater.org/discussions

Designers for Pilgrims Musa and Sheri include Nephelie Andonyadis (sets), Brittany Shemuga (lights), Danielle Preston (costumes), Roc Lee (sound), and Michelle Elwyn (props).

Voices from a Changing Middle East Festival Readings

The 20th Anniversary Voices from a Changing Middle East Festival will feature readings uplifting themes of “Egypt in Mind and Memory,” while returning to bedrock Festival investigations of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, along with a seminal interfaith drama kicking off the reading series.

January 13, 2020 at 6:30 pm: Nathan The Wise Adapted and directed by Michael Bloom from the original by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Written in 1779, Nathan the Wise was initially banned by the Church and later the Nazis because of its urgent plea for tolerance. Set during the Third Crusade in Jerusalem, the play is a Shakespearean fable dramatizing how the gaps between three religions are bridged by an enlightened
sultan, a Jewish merchant, and a mysterious Crusader. (At Petworth Public Library in Ward 4; part of “Mosaic on the Move”)

January 27, 2020 at 7 pm: **No Desert Roses** by *Laila Soliman*, directed by *Noelle Ghoussaini*
Set in Cairo at the precipice of past, present, and future, audiences are introduced to a nameless Egyptian writer and trio of other characters as they are swept through a deeply personal mosaic. Illuminating the many aspects of life in a country in the midst of revolution.Lang Theater (Lang Theatre, Atlas Performing Arts Center)

February 3, 2020 at 7 pm: **Bereaved** by *Joshua Sobol*, directed by *KenYatta Rogers*
A fateful meeting between an Israeli couple and a Palestinian couple, both having suffered the tragic, violent loss of a child to terror. The questions now are how and why each death came to pass. Fashioning the encounter initially as a poignant cry for compassion, the reality of the facts appear to offer none. (Lang Theater, Atlas Performing Arts Center)

February 10, 2020 at 7 pm: **I Was There** by *Motti Lerner*, directed by *Derek Goldman*, featuring *Cody Nickel*. From the author of *The Admission* and *After the War* comes "a daring theatrical attempt to deal with the complex situation making it difficult for IDF soldiers to preserve their humanity, while the country’s political leadership prefers to bury its head in the sand." (Maariv) In the hours after an Israeli soldier is kidnapped in Gaza, an artillery reserve officer responds in accordance with military protocol. He is moved to confess. The country’s institutions don’t want to hear. (Lang Theater, Atlas Performing Arts Center)

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**Primary Artist Bios for Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World**

**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
Shirley Sertosky (Director) has been a director, dramaturg, artistic leader, educator and programmer in the Washington, DC area since 2001. Between 2008–2016 she served in a series of leadership positions (including Interim Artistic Director for the 2015–2016 season) at Theater J. During her time at Theater J, Shirley was an integral part of season planning, public programming, casting, artistic oversight, future visioning, budgeting, and producing for eight mainstage seasons with 7–8 full productions and 2–3 festivals per year. Previous to that, she served as the New Works Coordinator for Catalyst Theatre Company and she was a founding member and producer for Bouncing Ball Theatrical Productions. Shirley has taught and mentored students from the age of six to eighty-six in the fields of directing, acting, improvisation, dramaturgy, play analysis, theatre appreciation, new play development and auditioning techniques in both a classroom setting (extra-curricular and at the University level) and for resident theatre education programs.

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 (which received two Helen Hayes Nominations for Best Actress), and The Rise and Fall of Annie Hall which received a 2009 Helen Hayes Nomination for Best New Play (Theater J); Rapture, Blister, Burn which received a Helen Hayes Award for Best Supporting Actress (Round House Theatre); The Jungle Book (Adventure Theatre); a 21/24 Signature Lab Workshop presentation of The Break (Signature Theatre); 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); (The Humana Festival of New Plays). Training: BFA, North Carolina School of the Arts; MFA, Catholic University.

At-A-Glance Information about Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World:
Pay What You Can Preview: Thursday, January 16 at 8 PM
Additional Rush Pay What You Can Preview Tix Available 1 Hour before show January 17–19.
Opening/Press Night: Sunday, January 19 at 7:30 PM
Closes: Sunday, February 16 at 3:00 PM
Ticket Prices: $20–$65
Performance Times: 8 PM Wednesday–Saturday; 3 PM Saturday & Sunday
Atlas Performing Arts Center address: 1333 H Street, NE • Washington, DC
Box Office Phone for Patrons: (202)399–7993 (ext. 2)
Contact for Press: Laley Lippard at (202)399–7993 (ext.155)

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: https://www.mosaictheater.org/pilgrims

VALET PARKING AVAILABLE AT 1360 H ST NE on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evenings, as well as Saturday and Sunday matinees.

About Mosaic Theater Company of DC

Independent, intercultural, entertaining, and uncensored, Mosaic Theater Company of DC is committed to making transformational, socially-relevant art, producing plays by authors on the front lines of conflict zones, and building a fusion community to address some of the most pressing issues of our times. Dedicated to making our theater a model of diversity and inclusion at every strata, on stage and off, Mosaic invests in the new as we keep abreast of our changing and challenging times to ensure that our theater is a responsive gathering space, all the while nurturing and producing art of the highest order.

We complement our productions with comprehensive engagement through free pre- and post-show programming, an annual intercultural festival, like our “Voices From a Changing Middle East” series, and educational initiatives, including our touring “Mosaic on the Move.” We strive to foster a culture of listening and welcoming, embracing complexity and a multi-focal perspective. Our plays speak truth to power and to the private places of our soul. Visit us at mosaictheater.org

About the Voices From a Changing Middle East Festival

The Voices from a Changing Middle East Festival is a central part of Mosaic programming, bringing to life the souls and struggles of the people in the Middle East. Created in 2000 by Mosaic Founding Artistic Director Ari Roth while at Theater J, the professional resident company of the DC Jewish Community Center, The Festival became the popular, critically-hailed, yet controversial program that ultimately triggered the dramatic inception of Mosaic at the end of 2014. Festival highlights during its first 14 seasons at Theater J include Sir David Hare’s Via Dolorosa which inaugurated the festival along with the interfaith Peace Café forum (co-founded by Roth and Mosaic founding board members, Mimi Conway and Andy Shallal); the world premieres of Miklat by Joshua Ford and From Tel Aviv To Ramallah: A Beatbox Journey by Rachel Havreluck featuring Yuri Lane; Motti Lerner’s West Bank drama, Pangs Of The Messiah; Hadar Galron’s Mikveh which anchored a six–play reading series featuring Women’s Voices from across the Middle East; Hillel Mitelpunkt’s The Accident; the 2011 Cameri Theatre of Tel Aviv’s production of Return To Haifa performed in Hebrew and Arabic from the Palestinian novella by Ghassan Kanafani; and the acclaimed
2014 workshop production of *The Admission*, Motti Lerner’s drama about an alleged atrocity during the War of 1948 (which subsequently moved from Theater J to Studio Theatre). Notable workshops have included Roth’s adaptation of *Ali Salem’s A Drive To Israel: An Egyptian Meets His Neighbors*, and David Zellnik’s *Ariel Sharon Hovers Between Life and Death and Dreams of Theodore Herzl*, and a critical disquisition on Caryl Churchill’s *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza*.

In its 2016 inaugural offerings during Mosaic’s first Voices From a Changing Middle East Festival at the Atlas Performing Arts Center (and two other venues), a trio of solo shows brought to life a multiplicity of perspectives, including Palestinian Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish’s *I Shall Not Hate*; Aaron Davidman’s *Wrestling Jerusalem*; and Leila Buck’s *Hkeelee (Talk To Me)* which was performed at Arena Stage’s Kogod Cradle. In residence at Woolly Mammoth Theatre’s rehearsal lab, Mosaic told the story of Eritrean and Sudanese refugees seeking asylum in Israel in Shay Pitovsky and Shahar Pinkas’ *Promised Land*; while an Israeli family grew irrevocably divided over the country’s near perpetual state of violence and insecurity in the world premiere of Motti Lerner’s *After The War*.

In Mosaic’s Season Two, the 2017 Voices Festival commemorated 50 years of Occupation with two searing works by Israeli and Palestinian authors; Gilad Evron’s *Ulysses On Bottles*, alongside Hana Eady and Edward Mast’s *The Return*. The 2018 Voices Festival launched a four-campus national tour, with several seminal works traveling to Oklahoma and Eastern Mennonite Universities, Grinnell College, and the University of Chicago, presenting a multi-faith lens on the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict. That same spring, Mosaic brought two nationally renowned directors and two sets of multilingual ensembles to DC to produce the most ambitious productions of the Festival’s history; Broadway director Mark Brokaw staged *Paper Dolls*, Philip Himberg’s play with music based on the acclaimed Israeli documentary film by Tomer Heymann about Filipino guest workers in Tel Aviv; and culminated with the world premiere staging of Mona Mansour’s *The Vagrant Trilogy*, four decades in the life of a Palestinian family, staged by Mark Wing-Davey and developed in collaboration with New York’s Public Theater where *The Trilogy* will be produced in March, 2020. In 2018–19, the Voices Festival produced its first comedy, *Oh, God* by Anat Gov; followed by a searing documentary theater piece about cultural censorship in Israel, *Shame 2.0 (With Comments From The Populace)* by Einat Weizman with Morad Hassan. The 2020 Voices Festival innovates again with the regional premiere of Yussef El Guindi’s *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World*, undergirding themes of “Egypt in Mind and Memory” while continuing its explorations of long-running Israeli-Palestinian dramas presented in a series of readings.

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