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Berkeley Rep Does Arabs

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BERKELEY REP DOES ARABS

The old fashioned title should have warned me: The Arabian Nights. If I had been paying attention. But I wasn't. So, I happily announced the staging of these medieval Middle Eastern tales to anyone who would listen, bought tickets, and headed to the theater with family in tow. And the first few glimpses of the stage and the opening of the play only heightened my excitement. The tall concrete slabs that serve as the backdrop to Berkeley Rep's Thrust Stage initially seemed awfully stark framing the white-sheet-clad stage props, but the actors pulled off the sheets and began unfolding colorful rugs onto the stage. The more they unfolded, the more rugs they found hidden inside other rugs until the vibrant reds covered the stage from side to side and made the concrete slabs a distant presence. And the actors themselves were adorned in the loveliest costumes of reds and golds and rich browns. The live music and the instruments on the stage expertly set the mood of expectation for the delights of the mysterious Orient.

I'll admit to being impatient, almost breathless to see Shahrazad, this female paragon of Eastern wit and intellect, a young woman who had said to her father, "I wish thou wouldst give me in marriage to this King Shahryar; either I shall live or I shall be a ransom for the virgin daughters of Moslems and the cause of their deliverance from his hands and thine." Of course her father, the Wazir, had ungraciously called her "scanty of wit," but Shahrazad was not to be thwarted and had defied her father to marry the murderous King Shahryar. She had let the king "do away with her maidenhead" and then expressed a desire to tell her sister a story. The sleepless king had granted this wish. And now, in 2008, sitting in the audience in Berkeley Rep, I felt the stirrings of pride, that the audience would see this Middle Eastern woman, and come to admire and acknowledge her assertive courage, her heart of sacrifice.

This was also the precise moment that I realized my mistake. Shahrazad entered and she had the whitest porcelain skin and the lightest blond hair. Dark-haired and dark-skinned actresses surrounded her, playing her sister and slaves but this future queen, the rescuer of Moslem virgins looked eastern European not Middle Eastern! And gone was her self-assertion, the will to decide her own destiny. In Mary Zimmerman's *The Arabian Nights*, King Shahryar explicitly asks the Wazir for her. When the father brings news of this fate, Shahrazad weeps and finally acquiesces, reminding herself and the audience that she might be able to save other lives. Her wedding night encounter with the king is screechy, almost whiny. The sexual act is barely implied; yet the gleaming dagger at Shahrazad's throat is real. It dominates the first act as the unhinged king, ferocious in his desperate pain, keeps it there and presses it into her flesh in every bit of conversation between them.

Within the first act, nights pass as a beleaguered Shahrazad weaves her tales of imagination and enthralls the king. These tales are lively, colorful stories brought to life by an energetic cast that gleefully plays and sings –albeit off-key sometimes. The audience is entertained, and I chuckle along with everybody else at the bawdy humor

and ribald tales. At the end of the first act, the king finally approaches Shahrazad with tender desire and she pulls the dagger out of his hand and over her head during their kiss. This obviously bodes well for Sharazad. I, however, feel uneasy: almost every tale has been a sexcapde and the last one dealt extensively with the story of a man breaking wind. The beginning of the second act brings some release, as King Shahryar asks=2 OSharazad for a serious tale, and she serves up the one of Sympathy the Learned, a female scholar who bests all men of learning and science at Harun-al-Rashid's court, and who ultimately even refuses an offer of marriage from the caliph himself. However, would it sound ungrateful if I said that in the era of president-elect Barack Obama casting a black woman in the role of a learned Arab scholar is no longer daring? Try casting put a brunette with olive skin in that role. Believe me, that would not be so amiss in a play entitled *The Arabian Nights*. Alas, between the blond Shahrazad and the black Sympathy, the brunettes are relegated to being lascivious cheating wives or self-sacrificing virgins.

So, is this a case of sour grapes, a leveling of the charge that "Arab is the new Black"? No. I'll give credit where credit is due: in the interview printed in the program, the playwrights Zimmerman asserts that she was drawn to the collection of stories during the first Gulf War because she was affected by the military pronouncement that the U.S. would "bomb Iraq 'back to the Stone age' " and by a report on high "infant mortality in the Middle East." Her intention is indeed to show "people as fundamentally the same." Yet, she does not succeed in doing so. To laugh at a people or "tsk, tsk" their waywardness does not have a leveling effect but rather creates a hierarchy. In the nineteenth-century Europe's Orientalist paintings often seemed populated with dark and brutal men on the verge of violating terrified virgins, preferably white-skinned virgins. The mirror image of those girls is the loose Eastern woman awash in sexuality and come-hither looks. The problem with this vision of the Orient is that it fortifies West's image of itself as the White man who must forcefully rescue the decadent, dark East. Edward Said famously defined Orientalism as "a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts." This form of Orientalism is alive and well in Mary Zimmerman's *The Arabian Nights*. It is time to let go of old images and cast our world in a new mold. It is time for a change. And, yes, we can!