



ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN AND ISLAMIC CULTURES

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By Nathalie Handal

Muslim women's contribution to theater in the United States – particularly in the last decade – is one of profusion as their dynamic presence is visible and growing in all areas of theater whether as writers, directors, producers, or actors. Their involvement in comedy and drama and classical and experimental theater demonstrates their diversity, aesthetically, thematically, and structurally. These women also challenge stereotypes, raise awareness, and create spaces for dialogues. Simultaneously, their works have at times been controversial among some Muslims, especially when dealing with issues of women and sexuality. Most of these women artists were born in the 1960s and 1970s in North America, the Arab world, or Asia.

One Muslim woman of the stage from an earlier generation stands out, the award-winning playwright, actress, and director, Bina Sharif, originally from Islamabad, Pakistan. Sharif, a pioneer, is one of the first Muslim women to be involved in theater in North America. Her powerful and provocative scripts and performances have been entertaining and challenging audiences for over 25 years. More than 24 of her pieces, ranging from one-act to full-length plays, have been produced. She wrote and performed her first one-woman piece, *Cosmo Girl* in 1981, the success of which led to the production of her first full length play, *In Between* in 1983. *In Between*, like much of her tragi-comedy work, deals with an immigrant woman who dares to dream amidst the turbulences of exile and racism. Sharif was an integral part of the New York Lower East Side art and cultural movement in the 1980s. Initially, she did not feel it necessary to emphasize her Muslim identity but when the first Gulf War started and political tensions rose, she felt she had to address Islam in her work, so she wrote, *Kill* (1991) about the United States invasion of Iraq. She continues to write and perform today; some of her more provocative plays include *Afghan Women* (2002), about the life of a Muslim woman; *Sex Industry* (1997), about girls working in sex clubs in New York City; and *Democracy in Islam* (2005), about the representation of Muslims and Islamic culture in America and the West through the portrayal of a Pakistani American Muslim family living in Manhattan's East Village.

Important young Muslim women playwright-performers today include Iranian American Layla Dowlatshahi, who has written numerous plays including *The Joys of Lipstick* (Producers Club, New York), a drama about an Iranian lesbian who goes to Los Angeles to visit family with the intention of getting a sex change and returning to Iran to live as a man with her American girlfriend, and *Waiting Room*, about Muslim women in a Serbian rape camp. Kayhan Irani, another Iranian American playwright-performer, wrote *We've Come Undone*, which deals with post-11 September 2001. Palestinian American Betty Shamieh's play *Roar* was produced by the Clurman Theatre, New York. Shamieh's plays have dealt with various themes from Arab American identity to love. The Lebanese American Leila Buck's powerful one-woman show *ISite*, examines identity and child-hood, and growing up in different cultural, social, and political climates. Iraqi American performer-writer, Heather Raffo, had tremendous success with her play *Nine Parts of Desire*, about the lives of contemporary Iraqi women. Najla Said, a Palestinian American performer-writer and founding member of Nibras, an Arab American theater collective, starred in Raffo's play at the Seattle Repertory Theatre. She has also written a one-woman show, *Palestine*, featured at the 2006 Public Theatre's “New Works Now.” Pakistani American Fawzia Afzhal-Khan has been performing and writing for theater for decades, having been involved in all types of production, from classical to experimental theater.

Some important Muslim American directors are Iranian American Maryam Habibian, whose directorial credits include Theatre of the Reflecting Pool and Forugh's Reflecting Pool, among many others, and Isis Saratial Misdary, an Egyptian American director, dramaturge, and actor who has directed and/or dramatized over 30 plays. Among other theatrical projects, she is also working on *The Details of Silence* by Palestinian American playwright Nathalie Handal at the Lark Play Development Center in New York. The play explores the internal and external landscapes of eleven Arab women coming from different parts of the world.

There are numerous Muslim American actresses; among the most well-known is the Palestinian American Maysoon Zayid, who has gained popularity throughout the United States as a stand-up comedienne. Zayid was the first comedienne to perform stand-up live in Palestine and she is also the co-founder of the Arab American Comedy Festival, which showcases numerous Arab American actors, directors, and producers. Other actresses include Helen Maalik, a Syrian American comedian; Lameece Issaq, Palestinian American writer, actress, and director, whose theater credits include *Dinosaur Within* (Austin Circle of Critics Nomination, Best Actress in a Drama) and *Seven Deadly Sins* (Austin Circle of Critics Award, Best Actress in a Comedy); and Jana Zenadeen, a Lebanese American actress and writer who co-wrote and performed in the hit play, *Live! With Pascale and Chantal!*

All the founding members and members of Nibras are also important theatrical writers, directors, and/or producers; they include Leila Buck, Maha Chehlaoui, Nathalie Handal, Rana Kazkaz, Najla Said, and Afaf Shawwa. Nibras, the first and only Arab American theater collective in the United States, a company-in-residence since 2006 at the New York Theatre Workshop, includes Muslim and non-Muslim women as its members. Its mission is to create a network for Arab American theater artists to share their talent, experience, and passion through imaginative and articulate productions and educational programs that increase the positive visibility and creative expression of Arabs and Arab Americans. Nibras's debut production, *Sajjil* (Record) won Best Ensemble at the 2002 NY Fringe Festival and they have since co-sponsored the Arab American Comedy Festival, co-produced *Acts for Palestine*, a festival of one-act plays by Palestinian playwrights, and in collaboration with New York Theatre Workshop co-produced two nights of "New Work Now" at the Public Theater and *Aswat: Voices of Palestine*, showcasing theatrical works from or about Palestine and the issues, challenges, and dialogues they raise.

Other important theater companies that are either run by or support works by Muslim Americans include SALAAM Theatre. Founded by its artistic director, actress and producer Geeta Citygirl, SALAAM is a not-for-profit professional theater company that features works by South Asian Americans. The Kazbah Project Ltd. is a theater and film production company that has brought together world-class artists to tell timely, provocative stories that reflect a growing global community (co-founded by Syrian American actress, writer, director, and producer Rana Kazkaz and Nathalie Handal, Associate Artist and Development Executive). Kazkaz was one of the producers of the festival *Unexpected Journeys*, *Muslim Women Playwrights*. Other producing credits include *Imagine: Iraq and Venus*. Some of her acting credits are: *Closetland*, *Not in Front of the Baby*, *A Moment of Grace*, and *The Seagull*. Golden Thread Theatre Company's *ReOrient* Festival in California led by Torange Yeghiazarian has been an important supporter of works by Muslim women, and a new company, *Palestinian Theatre in Motion* (founded by Razanne Carmey and Nathalie Handal) has been created to bring Palestinian theater to the world.

These talented Muslim, Middle Eastern, and Arab women are gaining increased recognition as their presence in all areas of the stage is expanding. Their multilayered work is an invaluable contribution to world theater.

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