

Arabian Nights: Story, spectacle, sex

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For Amusement

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All right, friends, let's go time-travelling. WHOOOOAAA!

1704 CE: French scholar Antoine Galland translates an ancient collection of Middle Eastern tales into a western language (French) for the first time.

More time traveling. WHOOOOAAA!

2010 CE: Miami University theatre students perform *Arabian Nights*, a theatrical production of these tales, only with less mention of baguettes and berets.

In the three centuries between these two events, the western world has grown obsessed with Galland's found tales, popularly known as *The Thousand and One Nights*, especially the heroine of the story, Scheherazade — so much so her name is included in Microsoft Word's spell and grammar check. Win.

Director Lewis Magruder describes the play in terms of story-telling Scheherazade.

"The voyage of this play is about Scheherazade, a young woman, working very hard to distract this mad murderous king, Shahryar, and entertain him and help him open his heart, to feel, to enter the human race, and learn how to forgive," Magruder said.

What does he have to forgive, you may be asking.

Well, Shahryar is a little crazy when it comes to women. Played by English education major Jeff Sams, Shahryar's first wife decided to cheat on him. Sha-sha caught her, got angry and killed her because, as well know, that's the best way to deal with a cheater.

"He's been betrayed, and has this vengeance for women," Sams said. "So, since he killed his wife, he marries a new virgin every night, sleeps with her, then kills her."

After 3,000 of these crazy-fun shindigs, Scheherazade enters and saves the day.

"She saves her own life by telling the king stories every night to distract him from killing her, while at the same time using the stories to teach him morals and change his heart," Sams said.

"And slowly but surely, after 1,001 nights, she does that."

Then, at the very end, there's a twist in their love story that will make you scream, "OH, SNAP!" I don't want to spoil the ending ... but damn.

Framed by Scheherazade's narration, the show is a series of stories being brought to life by an ensemble of 15 actors playing more than 50 characters.

This level of theatricality is unique, allowing the audience to witness things that usually occur only behind the curtain. For instance, costume changes take place onstage.

Unfortunately no one gets completely naked — you can't win 'em all ...

"The costume changes occurring onstage allow the audience to be involved and engaged in the transformation of character," Magruder said, speaking of the role-doubling (or in some cases role-quintupling) of all actors in the show. "It's a visual metaphor for the human capacity to change and transform, which I think is a common thread throughout the show."

Along with costume changes and character transformation onstage, *Arabian Nights* incorporates music, movement and an extreme amount of physicality and athleticism. Chelsea Skalski, a

sophomore theatre major and cast member of *Arabian Nights*, said the show is heavily laden with spectacle.

“I don’t think people are expecting it to be the huge spectacle show that is, what with the comedy and the movement — I’m just excited to see people react to it because it is such a huge show,” Skalski said. “I know a lot of people are afraid of theatre or think it’s boring, but this isn’t regular theatre. It’s fun and enjoyable and you don’t have to worry about finding a higher meaning.”

Gion DeFrancesco, scenic designer for *Arabian Nights*, tried to adapt his set to the high level of spectacle Skalski speaks of. By making the set “flexible,” so to speak, DeFrancesco has created a blank canvas for the actors to fill with storytelling, dance, song, movement, etc.

“The challenge was figuring out how all of the stories can be part of set,” DeFrancesco said.

“There are times of real beauty in the story, and I am hoping there will be something in the set that creates real beauty in the environment, as well.”

This scenic beauty shouldn’t be too difficult, as the magnificent set is gorgeous even without stories. With a desert-influenced color scheme of sandy beiges to rusty reds, the scenery creates a feeling of being in the Middle East. The backdrop is a nature scene, influenced by Turkish miniature paintings, bringing the outdoors in.

“It’s a pretty fictitious looking location in that it doesn’t have any characteristics of a real architectural space,” DeFrancesco said. “There are no clearly defined walls, just folding screens, and beyond that is a painted backdrop, which is 2D and therefore not very realistic, and it really goes along with the theatricality of the text and helps to maintain that fairy tale element.”

But *Arabian Nights* is nothing like the children’s fairy tales we know and love.

“Over the years, we’ve turned fairy tales into something sweet and light. Mary Zimmerman, the playwright, doesn’t do that,” Magruder said. “The stories in the show are still fairy tales, but there’s a darkness to them as well as a light. There’s a poignancy, but still a lot of laughter along the way.”

Oh, the laughter. There’s so much of it.

Comedy is a central element to *Arabian Nights*, and with the myriad funny moments, I would suggest wearing an adult diaper to see this show. If you’re a sucker for sex jokes or songs about farts, definitely invest in some Depends before going to see the show.

Arabian Nights has more to offer than comedy (though what else do you need besides good sexual innuendo?), and its stories carry themes of romance, family, morality and wealth. Ancient in origin, the tales of *Arabian Nights* can still be enjoyed by a contemporary audience if only because their messages are still extremely applicable and relatable.

“There’s a lot of passion to the stories, and anyone who comes to see it will connect with that passion on a personal level,” DeFrancesco said. “The audience becomes engaged in the stories in a very active way, and I think they will find a way to relate to the messages of the show.”

Magruder agreed, adding, “The material is very accessible — it’s not like Shakespeare where you need footnotes to understand a joke. The fact that the material is so easy to understand and relate to is one of the things that makes it such a fun show.”

Arabian Nights is currently showing at Gates-Abegglen Theatre in the Center for Performing Arts. Tickets are \$6 for students/youth, \$8 for seniors and \$9 for adults. They are available at the Miami Box Office in Shriver Center (513) 529-3200 or online at <http://www.tickets.muohio.edu>.

The show runs at 8 p.m. April 15, 17 and April 22, 24 and at 2 p.m. April 25.



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