

■ 'Muslim Voices: Arts & Ideas'

New York to host 10-day, multi-venue, many-genre arts fest

By Jyotirmoy Datta

Asia Society, Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), and New York University Center for Dialogues unveiled an unprecedented 10-day, multi-venue, many-genre arts festival, 'Muslim Voices: Arts & Ideas'.

Set for this summer, June 5-14, the festival celebrates the extraordinary range of artistic expression throughout the Muslim world, including India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

One of the highlights of the festival will be a revival of the lost art of Urdu storytelling, 'Dastangoi: The Adventures of Amir Hamza, with star of India's new wave Bollywood cinema Naseeruddin Shah performing as a traditional folk storyteller June 7-8 at the Asia Society's Lila Acheson Wallace Auditorium.

Shah is to join Daanish Hussain and Mahmood Farooqi, -- the two persons credited with restoring piece by piece the lost art of dastangoi in India -- in retelling the adventures of the Prophet Muhammed's uncle Amir Hamza in an artfully dramatized oral narrative.

Exploring a fascinating world full of magic, sorcery, and tricksters, The Adventures of Amir Hamza will be performed in the rich Indian storytelling tradition of dastangoi which dates back to medieval Iran (Persia).

Announcing at the Asia Society in New York on Feb. 3 the full line-up of the coming festival this summer, the Society's President Visakha N. Desai said, "No more pressing issue faces the world today than the profound lack of understanding between Western and Islamic societies. Most non-Muslim Americans have very limited exposure to -- and even misconceptions about -- Islam, the world's second-largest religion."

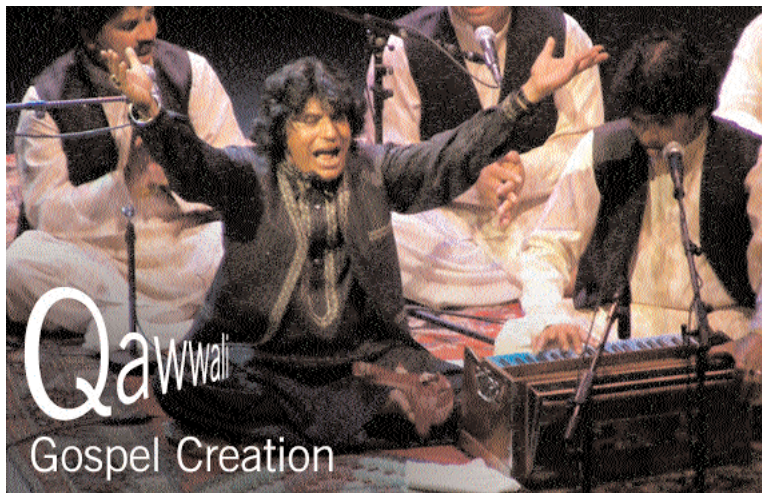
More than 100 artists and speakers from as far away as South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa and as near as Brooklyn, will gather for performances, films, exhibitions, talks, and other events, ranging from the traditional (calligraphy, storytelling, and Sufi devotional voices) to the contemporary (video installations and Arabic hip-hop).

In addition to the mainstage offerings and complementary education and humanities events from Asia Society, BAM, and NYU Center for Dialogues, programs associated with the 'Muslim Voices: Arts & Ideas' festival will take place at locations including: Austrian Cultural Forum New York, Brooklyn Museum, MoCADA (Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts), The Metropolitan Museum of Arts, and The New York Public Library.

Mustapha Tlili, NYU Center for Dialogues Founder and Director, added that it was not for art to settle the issues dividing the Islamic from Western societies. "The divide between the United States and the Muslim world is rooted in hard political issues such as the question of Palestine, the war in Iraq, relations with Iran, and other points of contention. Muslim Voices: Arts & Ideas aims to help change perceptions, foster mutual understanding and respect between the two sides, and pave the way for the solution of the hard issues."

"Asia Society, BAM and NYU Center for Dialogues would like to thank the many donors who have supported this complex and worthwhile project," said BAM's President Karen Brooks Hopkins. "We were brought together by a need to create common ground, and a shared feeling that the arts can play a unique and singular role in bringing people together."

Muslim Voices: Arts & Ideas originated in conversations between Mustapha Tlili and Karen Brooks Hopkins at an international conference in Kuala Lumpur organized by the NYU Center for Dialogues.



Qawwali Gospel Creation

Pakistani singer Faiz Ali Faiz and his Ensemble will be featured in Qawwali Gospel Creation Saturday, June 13 at 8:00 p.m. at BAM Harvey Theater. (Photo, as it appears on bam.org)

Asia Society was brought in as a partner for its long history of using arts and culture to promote understanding and deeper engagement between Asia-home to two thirds of the world's Muslim population-and the United States.

Following are some of the highlights of the festival:

MUSIC

- Youssou N'Dour (Senegal), Friday, June 5 at 8 p.m., BAM Howard Gilman Opera House, 30 Lafayette Avenue, Brooklyn, NY - World renowned singer N'Dour will perform songs that draw on his Islamic beliefs, African heritage, and global experiences.

- Muslim Voices at BAMcafé Live, Friday June 12 at 9:30 p.m. & Saturday, June 13 at 9:30 p.m., BAMcafé, 30 Lafayette Avenue, Brooklyn - BAMcafé Live will present a weekend of contemporary Muslim musicians. On Friday, June 12 at 9:30 p.m., rocker Brahim Fribgane & Friends and indie/alternative rock band zero-bridge will perform.

- Qawwali Gospel Creation, Saturday, June 13 at 8:00 p.m., BAM Harvey Theater - Qawwali Gospel Creation is an evening of musical exchange between Christian/African-American gospel and Qawwali, the 700-year old tradition of Sufi praise music popular in India and Pakistan. The program will feature New Orleans gospel singer Craig Adams and the Voices of New Orleans, and Pakistani singer Faiz Ali Faiz and his Ensemble.

THEATER

- Dastangoi: The Adventures of Amir Hamza, Sunday and Monday, June 7 & 8 at 7:30 p.m., Asia Society Lila Acheson Wallace Auditorium

VISUAL ART

- New York Masjid: The Mosques of New York City, Friday, June 5-Sunday, June 28, BAM Natman Room, 30 Lafayette Avenue, Brooklyn - This recent documentary project by Edward Grazda explores Islamic presence in New York by looking at the various places Muslims assemble to worship throughout the boroughs.

SPOKEN WORD

- Reza Aslan in Conversation with Vishakha Desai, Tuesday, June 9 at 6:30 p.m., Asia Society Lila Acheson Wallace Auditorium - Acclaimed author Reza Aslan ("No god but God") discusses Islam today in the context of history, faith, ideology and culture. In conversation with Asia Society President, Vishakha Desai, they explore historic patterns of interaction between the Muslim World and the United States, and the potential to build new and more meaningful relationships, particularly for the next generation.

- Chaikhana/Tea House, Wednesday, June 10

at 7:30 p.m., Asia Society Rose Conference Hall - Through the ages, the Islamic word's tea houses, royal courts and drawing rooms have served as popular salons for storytelling in the form of recited or sung poetry.

CONFERENCE

- Bridging the Divide between the U.S. and the Muslim World Through Arts and Ideas: Possibilities and Limitations, Friday, June 5-Sunday, June 7, presented by NYU Center for Dialogues at The Brooklyn Marriott

OUTDOOR MARKET/SOUK

- Souk, Saturday, June 6 from 12 noon-10 p.m. and Sunday, June 7 from 12noon-8 p.m., BAM (Ashland Pl between Hanson St and Lafayette Ave, Brooklyn, NY) - A vibrant souk, or open-air market featuring more than 150 vendors offering food, arts, and crafts from diverse Muslim cultures.

PARTNER EVENTS

- Exhibition: The Art of (Un)Veiling, May 21-Aug 29, Austrian Cultural Forum, 11 East 52nd Street, New York, NY - The veiling of women has become the most visible icon of contemporary Islam. The veil is heatedly discussed in the West, while in Islamic cultures, the veil has become a means to assert autonomy and stress the significance of protection and privacy. In this exhibition, artists from the Middle East, Europe and New York explore contemporary controversies.

- Installation: 'Masterpieces of Islamic Calligraphy' from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, June 2-Sept 1 - Showcases the calligraphic art of the Islamic world, from Spain to south Asia and beyond.

- Exhibition: 'Light of the Sufis: The Mystical Arts of Islam', June 5-Sept. 6, Brooklyn Museum- This installation will feature objects from the collections of the Brooklyn Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and private collections.

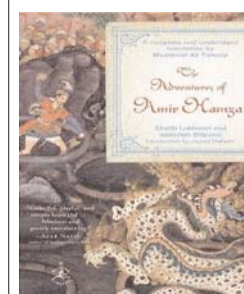
- Exhibition: 'Perspectives: Women, Art and Islam', June 6-Aug. 15, Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Art & Museum for African Art, 80 Hanson Place, Brooklyn - This exhibition, held in collaboration with the Museum for African Art, consists of five female artists of varied experiences, whose major connection is their personal relationships to Islam.

- Debates, discussions and conversations: 'Islam in Europe', June 9-11, The New York Public Library's Celeste Bartos Forum - Through a series of conversations, debates and discussions with leading European thinkers and their American counterparts the Library will examine the diverging ways Europe does and does not recognize Islam as part of its own heritage. This event is organized with the European Union National Institutes for Culture in New York (EUNIC New York).

■ Indo-Persian epic Akbar's favorite stories get a fresh lease of life

By Jyotirmoy Datta

Seven years after the historic 'Hamzanama' exhibition at the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery comes 'Dastangoi: The Adventures of Amir Hamza' at the Asia Society -- proof of revival of interest in the fantastic Indo-Persian epic.



Cover of 'The Adventures of Amir Hamza' by Ghalib Lakhnavi and Abdullah Bilgrami.

On display at the Sackler was the 'Hamzanama' commissioned by Emperor Akbar (1542-1605), who himself did not know how to read, but was fascinated by the stories as told to him as a child, and one of the first projects he commissioned on coming to the throne was an opulently illustrated

manuscripts by the Hindu and Muslim artists of the imperial atelier.

Akbar's favorite stories have gained a new significance in these troubled times and their retelling is most appropriate when the image of Islam has been distorted in current debates.

"To the delight of art historians," William Dalrymple, author of 'The Last Mughal,' wrote in the *New York Times*, "the Sackler brought together the long-dispersed pages of what is probably the most ambitious single artistic undertaking ever produced by the atelier of an Islamic court: no fewer than 1,400 huge illustrations were commissioned. More than anything else, it was the project that created the Mughal painting style, and in the illustrations one can see two artistic worlds - that of Hindu India and of Persianate Islamic Central Asia - fusing to create something new and distinctively Mughal."

The Urdu work by Ghalib Lakhnavi and Abdullah Bilgrami has been translated by the Pakistani Canadian writer Musharraf Ali Farooqi. Set in the Middle East, the Urdu version shows how far the story was "reimagined into an Indian context in the course of many years of subcontinental retelling. Though the original Mesopotamian place names survive, the world depicted is not that of early Islamic Iraq, but of 18th-century late Mughal India, with its love of gardens, its obsession with poetic wordplay and its extreme refinement in food, dress and manners," wrote Dalrymple. "Many of the characters have Hindi names; they make oaths like "as Ram is my witness"; and they ride on elephants with jeweled *howdahs*."

"It took particular hold in India, where it absorbed endless myths and legends and was regularly performed in public spaces in the great Mughal cities. At fairs and at festivals, on the steps of the Jama Masjid in Delhi or in the Qissa Khawani Bazaar, the "street of the storytellers" in Peshawar, the professional storyteller, or dastango, would perform nightlong recitations from memory; some of these could go on for seven or eight hours with only a short break. The Mughal elite also had a great tradition of commissioning private recitations. The greatest Urdu love poet, Ghalib, was celebrated for his dastan parties, at which the Hamza epic would be expertly told." In times of strife, it is good to be reminded of that Hamzanama is a joint legacy.

The Dastan-e-Amir Hamza existed in several manuscript versions. One version by Navab Mirza Aman Ali Khan Ghalib Lakhnavi was printed in 1855 and published by the Hakim Sahib Press, Calcutta, India. This version was later embellished by Abdullah Bilgrami and published from the Naval Kishore Press, Lucknow in 1871.