



Theater engagements for *Muslim Voices: Arts & Ideas* include *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* and *Dastangoi: The Adventures of Amir Hamza*

Part of *Muslim Voices: Arts & Ideas*, a city-wide festival celebrating the extraordinary range of artistic expression in the Muslim world presented by Asia Society, BAM, and NYU Center for Dialogues

Ten-day, multi-venue arts festival and conference includes artists from India, Indonesia, Iran, Kuwait, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Senegal, Syria, and the U.S.

New York, NY/April 30, 2009— Asia Society, BAM, and NYU Center for Dialogues announce Kuwait-based Sabab/Sulayman Al-Bassam Theatre's *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* and *Dastangoi: The Adventures of Amir Hamza*, featuring acclaimed film actor Naseeruddin Shah (*Monsoon Wedding*, *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*), Mahmood Farooqui, and Daanish Hussain. The engagements comprise the theater programming for *Muslim Voices: Arts & Ideas*—the unprecedented ten-day festival and conference taking place June 5–14, 2009 throughout New York City. *Muslim Voices: Arts & Ideas* celebrates the extraordinary range of artistic expression in the Muslim world with more than 100 artists from as far away as Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and as near as Brooklyn. In addition to theater, the festival features music, films, exhibitions, talks, and other events, ranging from the traditional to the contemporary. The full festival press release and line-up can be found at www.MuslimVoicesFestival.org.

Muslim Voices: Arts & Ideas June 5–14, 2009

Theater

Richard III: An Arab Tragedy

June 9–12 at 7:30pm

BAM Harvey Theater, 651 Fulton Street, Brooklyn, NY

Tickets: \$25, 35, 45 at 718-636-4100 or www.BAM.org

Artist Talk with Sulayman Al-Bassam, moderated by Marget Litvin
June 11, post-show (free for same-day ticket holders)

Adapted by Kuwait-born Sulayman Al-Bassam, this contemporary Arab version of *Richard III* was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company as part of the 2007 Complete Works Festival. The award-winning director sets Richard III's all-consuming struggle for power in the modern Arab world, a world of tribal links, family struggles, and absolute power. Shakespeare's text is uprooted from the medieval Christian world, reworked and transplanted to the oil-rich Islamic world of



Asia Society
725 Park Avenue, at 70th Street
New York, NY 10021
TEL 212.288.6400 FAX 212.517.8315
asiasociety.org



Brooklyn Academy of Music
Peter Jay Sharp Building, 30 Lafayette Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11217
TEL 718.636.4100 FAX 718.636.4179
BAM.org



New York University Center for Dialogues
194 Mercer Street, 4th Floor
New York, NY 10012
TEL 212.998.8693 FAX 212.995.4091
centerfordialogues.org

the Gulf today. The Financial Times (U.K.) praised, “few works catch the various currents within Arabism and Islam such as Al-Bassam. It is seldom that one sees a Shakespearean reworking that is so consistently enlightening while also retaining dramatic power.”

Richard III: An Arab Tragedy gives a window into the often-misunderstood world of the Gulf: its social customs, musical heritage, and some of its darker mystical rituals. The production is performed by a company of actors from across the Arab world in Arabic with English titles and accompanied by a live musical score.

Al-Bassam says of his production, “when the Royal Shakespeare Company first gave me the opportunity to work on this piece, I found myself confronted with two major questions: firstly, how could I take the heart of this text—foreign, strange and distant heart that it is—and transplant it into an Arab frame in such a way that it could still pulse, make sense, and live? Then, beyond that—assuming that was possible!—how could I re-present this new ‘body’ in different parts of the world in such a way that it could faithfully carry an Arab genealogy, an Arab sense of history and the marks and concerns of an Arab world view? The piece that emerged is an attempt to answer these questions.”

Sulayman Al-Bassam was born in Kuwait in 1972. He graduated from Edinburgh University and founded Zaoum Theatre in London in 1996, of which Sabab Theatre is the Arabic arm, established in Kuwait in 2002. Led by Al-Bassam and working alongside mixed groups of Arab and Western performers, the company’s work challenges, questions, and celebrates the complex relationship between the Arab world and the West. In 2004, Al-Bassam created the award-winning *The Al Hamlet Summit* followed in 2006 by *Kalila wa Dimna; The Mirror for Princes*. The company performs regularly to audiences in the U.K. and at festivals across the Middle East, Europe, and Southeast Asia. His work has been published in various languages and study of his work forms part of curricula at universities in the U.S. and the Middle East. He produces work in both the English and Arabic languages. Al-Bassam lives and works in Kuwait where he leads The Culture Project, a private arts agency aimed at developing the infrastructure and quality of live arts in Kuwait and the Gulf region. Future projects include a bilingual production of *Troilus & Cressida* with the Royal Shakespeare Company and a new commission, *The Petrol Station*.

Please contact Fatima Kafele at 718.636.4129 x4 or fkafele@bam.org for more information.

Dastangoi: The Adventures of Amir Hamza

June 7–8 at 7:30pm

Asia Society Lila Acheson Wallace Auditorium, 725 Park Ave (at 70th St), New York, NY

Tickets: \$ 22, 30 at 212-517-ASIA or www.AsiaSociety.org

Magic, sorcery, warriors, and tricksters come together in the vividly told stories of *Dastangoi: The Adventures of Amir Hamza*, as the trials and triumphs of the Prophet Muhammad’s uncle Amir Hamza are rendered. Acclaimed film actor Naseeruddin Shah (*Monsoon Wedding, League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*), Mahmood Farooqui, and Daanish Hussain create an enchanting world through a richly evocative combination of poetry and acting, expressing a love of language and the power of storytelling.

Dastangoi, a form of dramatized Urdu storytelling that dates back to medieval Iran (Persia) and is rooted in Persian and Arabic traditions, became popular in India as early as the sixteenth century. Building upon the one volume story of Amir Hamza—the uncle of the Prophet Muhammad—the Urdu Dastangohs (storytellers) wove and expanded tales over generations so that the tradition became indigenized, expanding, (like other grand traditions of Indic storytelling) to mammoth proportions. When the stories were finally printed at the turn of the twentieth century, they comprised forty-six volumes of more than a thousand pages each, making the Dastan-e-Amir Hamza the single largest narrative ever published.

Dastangoi represents the art and drama of telling tales and the roots of acting. The performances at Asia Society consist of portions of the best-known daftar (chapter) of the Dastan-e-Amir Hamza, the Tilism Hoshroba or the “Enchantment that Steals Away the Senses.” Dastangohs are seated throughout the performance, expressions,

gestures, and tone of voice to convey the drama. The performers—Naseeruddin Shah, Mahmood Farooqi and Danish Husain—will be speaking in Urdu with English titles.

Hailed as “an enthralling revival of a dying tradition” (*Dawn* newspaper, Pakistan) the production was envisioned by scholar and (*Dastangoi* co-performer) Mahmood Farooqui.

Naseeruddin Shah is one of India’s most eminent actors and is recognized internationally for his starring roles in films such as *Monsoon Wedding* and in the theater, where his credits include productions and workshops with Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, and Habib Tanvir. He made his acting debut in Shyam Benegal's 1975 film, *Nishant*, and has enjoyed a prolific Bollywood career. Shah also starred in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (co-starring Sean Connery) where he played the role of Captain Nemo. He has performed in Indian adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (titled *Maqbool*) and *Othello* (titled *Omkara*), and his theater troupe is known throughout South Asia. His passion for and intrinsic comfort with the Urdu language is demonstrated in much of his work, including directorial ventures of plays written by Urdu legends Ismat Chughtai and Saadat Hasan Manto. Shah made his directorial film debut with *Yun Hota To Kya Hota*, released in 2006.

Mahmood Farooqui is a Delhi-based writer and performer who has directed and acted in plays in India, Pakistan, and numerous other countries. A self-trained actor and performer, he was initiated into theater as a schoolboy, and as stage manager by Mohan Maharishi, former director of India’s National School of Drama. He directed several plays at school and college, and prepared for the final entrance workshop of the NSD before founding his own amateur theater group called Dastak Theatre. Over the last three years, he has been working to revive Dastangoi, the lost art of storytelling in Urdu. His recent forays into acting include a role in Mahesh Dattani’s English film, *Mango Soufflé*. A former Rhodes Scholar, he holds an M.Phil. in Indian History from the University of Cambridge and writes extensively for several newspapers and journals on literature and the arts. He is also compiling a book on the 1857 uprising in Delhi for Penguin India while contributing to a collaborative blog called “Kafia.”

Daanish Hussain is former banker who gave up a lucrative career to commit himself fully to theater. He has worked with some of the most illustrious stage directors in India including Habib Tanvir, Barry John, and Rajinder Nath. He has been collaborating with Mahmood Farooqui for more than two years during which time they have performed together to great popular and critical acclaim throughout Pakistan and in most major cities in India. Danish is also a published English-language poet and is currently acting in his first Hindi feature film in Mumbai (Bombay).

Anusha Rizvi is a former television journalist and documentary filmmaker, currently directing her first feature film, *The Falling*. Rizvi is the executive producer of the program, is a collaborator in the effort to revive Dastangoi.

Please contact Elaine Merguerian at 212.327.9313 or elainem@asiasoc.org for more information.

About the festival

Muslim Voices: Arts & Ideas is an unprecedented ten-day festival and conference taking place June 5–14, 2009 throughout New York City. It is presented by Asia Society, BAM, and NYU Center for Dialogues. The festival features more than 100 artists and speakers from as far away as Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and as near as Brooklyn 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). Festival presentations and programs aim to present multiple perspectives from the Muslim world. 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: American Museum of Natural History, Austrian Cultural Forum New York, Brooklyn Museum, MoCADA (Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and The New York Public Library. More information can be found at www.MuslimVoicesFestival.org.

About the organizers

Asia Society is the leading global and pan-Asian organization working to strengthen relationships and promote understanding among the people, leaders, and institutions of the United States and Asia. The Society seeks to increase knowledge and enhance dialogue, encourage creative expression, and generate new ideas across the fields of policy, business, education, arts, and culture. Through the presentation of groundbreaking museum exhibitions and cultural programs, Asia Society provides a forum for both traditional and contemporary Asian artistic expressions. Founded in 1956 by John D. Rockefeller 3rd, Asia Society is a nonprofit educational institution with offices in Hong Kong, Houston, Los Angeles, Manila, Melbourne, Mumbai, New York, San Francisco, Seoul, Shanghai, and Washington, D.C. For more information visit AsiaSociety.org.

Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) is recognized internationally for its innovative programming of dance, music, theater, music-theater, opera, and film. BAM presents leading national and international artists and companies in its annual Spring Season and highlights groundbreaking, contemporary work in the performing arts with its Next Wave Festival each fall. Founded in 1983, the Next Wave is one of the world's most important festivals of contemporary performing arts. BAM Rose Cinemas features new, independent film releases and BAMcinématek—a curated, daily repertory film program.

BAM also serves New York City's diverse population through a weekend concert series in BAMcafé, community events, literary series, artist talks, and a wide variety of educational programs. BAM, America's oldest performing arts center in continuous operation, has presented performances since 1861, and attracts an audience of more than 500,000 people each year. The institution is led by President Karen Brooks Hopkins and Executive Producer Joseph V. Melillo—each of whom has been associated with BAM for more than twenty-five years. For more information visit BAM.org.

NYU Center for Dialogues is an institution of New York University dedicated to knocking down the walls of misunderstanding between the Islamic world, the United States, and other Western countries and replacing them with bridges of knowledge, mutual respect, and reason. Founded in the aftermath of the Sept 11, 2001 tragedy by Director Mustapha Tlili, the NYU Center for Dialogues has established a solid reputation on both sides of the Muslim-Western divide. Its conferences are widely discussed in international policy circles and its publications are used as educational materials in university classrooms, while its initiatives have contributed to new connections made at the institutional and individual levels. Tlili is a NYU research scholar and senior fellow at the university's Remarque Institute. He is a former senior UN official, having served as director for communications policy at the UN Department of Public Information, director of the UN information center for France, and chief of the Namibia, Anti-Apartheid, Palestine, and decolonization programs in the same department. For more information visit centerfordialogues.org.

For more information contact:

Asia Society: Elaine Merguerian, at 212.327.9313 or elainem@asiasoc.org

BAM: Fatima Kafele, at 718.636.4129 x4 or fkafele@bam.org

NYU Center for Dialogues: Andrea Stanton, at 212.998.7137 or stanton@centerfordialogues.org

CREDITS

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