

*Arabian Nights*, or as it is known in its native Arabic language, *The Thousand Nights and One Night* (الف ليلة وليلة), has a fascinating history. Emerging from a time when Baghdad was the crossroads of the world's economic, cultural and intellectual trade, the tales were passed around orally before they were ever written down. By the time they were first written in Arabic in the 9th Century CE, they had already been shaped and reshaped over the years by travelers and tellers from the Middle East and all around the world. And by the time they were translated into French in 1704, still more fingers had been stirring the narrative pot – as they continue to do so to this day. Perhaps that is why *The Thousand Nights and One Night* continues to be acknowledged as one of the greatest entertainments in human history – because it is so much a part of our collective heritage. As a cultural artifact, *The Thousand Nights and One Night* is a testament to a collaborative and unifying human experience.

When she created this adaptation of *The Thousand Nights and One Night* in 1992, director Mary Zimmerman was responding to a prevailing sentiment she felt in the air: xenophobia. In the thick of the first Gulf War, she was troubled by the “othering” at work in the media and in the political discourse that seemed so devoted to the idea that “we” are somehow fundamentally different from “them.” You may note, for instance, that Allah and God are used interchangeably in this text – a fantastic example of a commonality too often twisted into a difference. As we progress throughout the evening we remember that God is Allah and Allah is God. Belief in a higher power built in love and unity is a fundamental precept of Islam, Christianity, Judaism and countless other faiths. Religion, in this sense, becomes a way to understand each other, not to alienate each other. And though there are countless different ways to relate to Him, as Sympathy the Learned tells us – “all believers are our brothers.” And this is only one way in which Zimmerman masterfully spins these ageless tales, celebrating the stories and magic of a culture from a faraway land, exalting its uniqueness and highlighting its inherent similarities. How, she challenges her audiences, can we laugh and weep and sing together with stories like this and say we have nothing in common?

Of course, the stories you will see tonight are only a handful of the 1,001 stories that make up this epic narrative. And the overarching story they tell in this iteration is one of healing, humanity, duty and love. We watch Scheherezade, a brave and clever woman, as she puts her life on the line for her kingdom and her king, weaving together a gorgeous web of stories that prove to be the balm that restores the once great King Shahryar. Some heart-wrenching, some side-splitting, the selected tales of *The Thousand Nights and One Night* are a celebration of that most human impulse: telling a story. So tonight, we draw these stories up from their deep and distant roots and plant a seed in each of you. Perhaps those roots are not so distant after all...