

Rivers of Ink

*By Jill Henson
and Melonie Menefee*

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Hassan works as a scholar in the House of Wisdom specializing in translating legends. She spends her days alongside her father and twin. Together they are all living a dangerous secret. It is 13th century Bagdad at the height of Islamic civilization and women are forbidden in the House of Wisdom so Hassan and her sister are living and working as men. The daughters are living a protected and peaceful life yet Hassan longs to see the wonders the stories hold and often dreams of travelling the world. The arrival of a new scholar expands Hassan's horizons but will he jeopardize her secret identity as well as her future? In the midst of this, the Mongols descend to ransack. The city is thrust into chaos. The scholars are frantic trying to decide which manuscripts to save. In this confusion and panic, both sisters are discovered to be women and another scholar takes it upon himself to kill them. With death, sacrifice, and loss surrounding Hassan on all sides, she must decide the direction of her own story. A storyteller and ensemble provide narration and bring life to the stories Hassan has recently translated. Running time is approximately 45 minutes.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

"Rivers of Ink" was first produced by the BHS Theatre Department, Buffalo, Texas in March of 2016. It was directed by Jill Henson and Melonie Menefee. The cast was as follows:

Scheherazade - Mackenzie Morales; Abdul the Elder/Wealthy Merchant - Evan Grisham; Hassan - Kendall Morales; Ibrahim/Ensemble/Old Monk - Denisse Zapata; Ashraf/Ensemble/Young Abdul - Logan Freeman; Mubarak/Ensemble - Clay McGill; Kazim - Lilah Adams; Satara/Ensemble - Taylor Lack; Zhayan/Young Monk - Noah Rubel; Servant/Ensemble/Twins' Mother - Kayleigh Rhodes; Young Woman/Ensemble - Madison Rowan; Death Angel/Ensemble - Melanie McGill; Death Angel/Ensemble - Gracie Davis; Death Angel/Ensemble - Tana Cleveland; Nasir al-Malik - Zach White.
Production Team: Dylan Harris, Abby Smith, Shalyn Cotton, Stefani Trejo, Mary Beth Helmcamp, Jonathan Sanchez, Sheri Donaldson, Iveth Molina, Brittany Scott.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(5 m, 3 w, and ensemble)

SCHEHERAZADE: (*shuh-hair-ruh-ZA-duh*) Female, Arabian princess, a seasoned storyteller with passion and style. Each time she speaks and directs the transitions between scenes, the characters and ensemble should be busy depicting the actions for that transition, per director's imagination. She should be an active part of this show. May double and join ensemble.

HASSAN RASIL: (*huh-SUHN*) Female, an Arabian scholar.

KAZIM RASIL: (*kuh-ZEEM*) Female, Hassan's twin, an Arabian scholar.

ABDUL-MAHAIMIN RASIL: (*ahb-DOOL*) Father to the twins, an Elder Arabian scholar.

ASHRAF: (*ASH-RAHF*) A scholar and jokester.

IBRAHIM: (*IH-braa-hihm*) A scholar and lover of Baghdad.

MUBARAK: (*moo-BAH-ruk*) A pious, religious scholar.

NASIR AL-MALIK: (*NAHsr, almost one syllable*) A Persian scholar, traveler.

ENSEMBLE: Play the characters inside the various stories and can be other various elements. They are also the Mongols at the end of the play or servants in the House of Wisdom.

SETTING

Baghdad, 1257-8. A room in the House of Wisdom. The set is mostly decorated with signs of academia: books and manuscripts, scattered papers, scrolls, small tables and shelves, rugs and cushions representing workspaces, inkwells, candles, hanging tapestries. The room should be tastefully decorated if not richly decorated, for the scholars of Baghdad were handsomely financed by the Abbasid caliphs.

A Note on the Historical Accuracy

The House of Wisdom was a great library in Baghdad founded in the 9th century by one of the earliest Abbasid dynasty caliphs, al-Ma'mun. When the Mongols destroyed the city in 1258, no trace of it was left, and its exact location or what it even looked like is not known today. But its existence and importance is well documented.

All characters are original. Nasir is based on the astronomer Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, from Persia, but only very loosely. A reference is made to the Italian scholar Brunetto Latini from Tuscany, who was indeed real, but we've taken a liberty by deciding he possibly could have visited Baghdad during this time.

The use of Scheherazade as narrator needs a word here: Her legend and that of her thousand and one tales comes from the very early Abbasid period, perhaps the 7th or 8th century. Our play is set in the 13th century for historical accuracy of the invasion of 1258. However, we chose to use her to stay in keeping with the crucial theme and concept of her "tales;" this theme being that our stories never truly end. There will always be one more: if there are 100 million, there will always be the concept of the "and one," the stories outliving Scheherazade or any original storyteller.

We have also inserted Arabic and Persian proverbs, quotes, and poetry throughout the script.

Scene 1

(AT RISE: LIGHTS on set are low. SCHEHERAZADE appears.)

SCHEHERAZADE: Al salaam a'alaykum. Let Scheherazade tell you a story.

(ENSEMBLE comes out with books and a slow, steady boom of a drum. Ensemble speaks and grows louder with each boom.)

ENSEMBLE: *(Various assigned lines: Let me tell you a story, I have a story, I have so many stories, etc.)*

(ENSEMBLE is scattered around, frozen. SCHEHERAZADE takes HASSAN's book, opens it and finds a page. SFX: Arabian music begins.)

SCHEHERAZADE: Ah, yes. Arabia.

(MUSIC builds, LIGHTS change, ENSEMBLE changes.)

SCHEHERAZADE: *(Cont'd.)* At its height in mid-13th century, it stretched from Spain to India. But at its heart, the jewel of the empire? A city named Baghdad.

(LIGHTS up and ENSEMBLE comes to life. Ensemble as SCHOLARS, including KAZIM and HASSAN, are busy at work; YOUNG BOYS deliver and remove manuscripts and inkwells; much activity.)

SCHEHERAZADE: *(Cont'd.)* The Abbasid caliphate, fantastic architectural feats, breathtaking mosques, yes all. But most importantly, the known world's center of scholastic activity, for a lack of intelligence is the greatest poverty. And no institution in the great city was frequented more than *Bayt al-Hikma*, the House of Wisdom.

ABDUL: *(First, to IBRAHIM, studying his work.)* I am very interested in seeing what the end result is here. *(Turns.)* Hassan, history or fables today?

HASSAN: A bit of both, sir.

ABDUL: Lovely. Friends, Ma' salama *(Go with peace, be safe.)*

SCHOLARS: Good night, Allah maak *(God be with you.)* ma' salama, yes sir. *(Etc. Ad lib. Each ENSEMBLE SCHOLAR exits and says goodbye throughout next scene.)*

ASHRAF: Hassan, this showed up today. Drawings of far-away cities. Do you think you can copy them?

HASSAN: Oh, how wonderful! *(Flips through the book in amazement.)* It may take some time, but---Ah, Dubai! Oh my goodness...look at this!

IBRAHIM: No thank you. It is Baghdad for me. The smell of fresh-water shabbout grilling in the evenings, oh-oh, and the fruiter's shop! Shami apples, peaches, Sultani oranges. The intoxicating smells of jasmine, myrtle berries, narcissus. Our hanging gardens, and the baths---No sir. You may have Dubai. No city in the world can compare to ours.

MUBARAK: Ibrahim is correct. The only voyage any Muslim needs to make is of course to Mecca, and then home, where we have the best of everything.

HASSAN: But how would we know?

IBRAHIM: Why go anywhere? The world comes to us! Besides, we have Egyptian limes, cucumbers grown from Nile waters, beeswax from the Balkans—

HASSAN: But to see the Nile! And the pyramids—

IBRAHIM: Calm yourself, calm yourself. All right, fantastic sights may well exist, but if it is too far a trip for me to return in one day to my favorite bath in Baghdad, no. My massage calls my name as we quibble. Tomorrow, brothers! *(Exits.)*

ASHRAF: Hassan, why do you and Kazim never come to the baths in the evenings? No one will make fun of your feminine muscles, I promise.

KAZIM: Leave him alone. The only reason you go out so often is to avoid a nagging woman and a screaming baby.

ASHRAF: This is true. The baths are getting expensive.

KAZIM: You mean your bill is getting large.

(THEY laugh.)

ASHRAF: Ha, Kazim! Always with the laughs. Speaking of large things, I have a riddle for you! “I have heard of something or other, growing in its nook, swelling and rising, pushing up its covering. Upon that boneless thing a cocky-minded young woman took a grip with her hands---”

MUBARAK: Ashraf! Can you not come up with a simple riddle without it being vulgar? You should be ashamed.

ASHRAF: You be ashamed for me. Anyone? Eh? What is it? It's DOUGH! Ha! There, Mubarak. *You* are the vulgar one today!

(THEY laugh. MUBARAK exits.)

HASSAN: Clever.

ASHRAF: Consider getting out, Hassan. There is more to life than work! Much more! *(Exits.)*

KAZIM: Someone needs to tell him there is more to life than pleasures. He is useless.

HASSAN: Not completely. I have no idea where he found this book, but it is amazing. Do you think these places really look like this? What I would give to see them all!

KAZIM: My dear younger brother---yes, you *are* younger! You cannot walk three steps without needing me to watch over you. And as I care nothing about traveling, we will stay here. Finish up so we can go home. *(Begins to put things away for the day.)*

HASSAN: *(Sighs, then starts flipping pages.)* At least let me tell you just one story. *(As KAZIM begins to protest.)* No, no, please; it has been weeks since I have found one this good! *(KAZIM agrees.)* Wait, sometimes it is hard to find a beginning in these stories...they each connect... Here! Yes, we can start here.

(During each “story,” the LIGHTS and MUSIC change, and the ENSEMBLE comes out to tell the story and become the characters/story elements. Maybe they act behind a scrim or are shadows behind a piece of fabric. The ensemble “brings

End of Freeview

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