

Fa La La La La
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'Tis the Season for Religions of the Silk Road



Revisiting our presentation of "Artists on Faith" at the Chicago Leadership Prayer Breakfast on December 12, 2012

"If all the world's a stage and every stage an altar, then religion and theatre share similar planes".

(Jamil Khoury, Founding Co-Executive Artistic Director)

Ten years ago this week Silk Road Rising participated in the Chicago Leadership Prayer Breakfast, an annual celebration of our city's interfaith community. We brought together five theater artists of Buddhist (Dwight Sora), Christian (Jamil Khoury), Hindu (Kamal Hans), Jewish (Susan Adler), and Muslim (Khurram Mozaffar) traditions to share their perspectives about the influence of one's faith on the artistic process.

reflection, a wonderful reminder that our major world religions emerged and developed along the historic Silk Road.



Our latest offering of Polycultural Institute's soon-to-be-launched online publication, *The Polyculturalist*, features celebrated playwright, essayist, poet, author, editor, and screenwriter, Velina Hasu Houston.

Stay tuned for expanded interview transcripts when *The Polyculturalist* officially debuts on Substack.

Introducing Velina Hasu Houston

This interview was conducted on September 9, 2022, by Dr. Tasneem Mandviwala, Polycultural Institute's Advisory Council Coordinator.

Tasneem: You have long been a leader in both artistic and academic circles around the experiences of mixed-heritage peoples, particularly your own mixed African American and Japanese heritage. How does being mixed heritage inform your playwriting, scholarship, and public persona?



Velina Hasu Houston: My mixed-race identity usually gets reduced to Japanese and African American, but it's actually more mixed than that. On my Asian side, I have a bit of Korean and Chinese heritage, and on my father's side, I have African American, Native American,

things in my work take me into other parts of Japanese and African American.”

In terms of my writing, my mixed-race heritage has allowed me to see the world in a broader and deeper way. When I look at an individual, I don't make any assumptions about how they live their lives culturally. I build characters who are very complicated culturally, even if they appear to be monoracial.



Tasneem: Your playwriting is often received as an invitation to people from cultures other than your own to find themselves in experiences they may not be familiar with. How does your theatrical aesthetic align with polyculturalism?

because many ethnicities come to the table and merge without taking anything away from those cultural backgrounds; that's meaningful for me. I don't think of my playwriting as an invitation to a different world, per se. As a writer, I write about what I know. The worlds I represent are not "different," but ones that I've walked through. My stories are filtered through who I am, and they do end up representing worlds that may be Japanese or Asian. Those identities intersect with other cultural identities in my world, though, not intentionally, but because that is the nature of my world. I feel that when many people come into it, they feel that it's "exotic" or "different." In some respects, they do get invited into a world that is different from theirs, but it isn't strategic; it simply is the way my world is.



Velina with her late mother, Setsuko Takechi, in February 2022. Of blessed memory.

Tasneem: Could you speak about why you use the term “integrative feminist” and how integrative feminism lives in your work?

about ethnicity and culture if one truly believes in justice for women. It feeds my work because the women in my plays are not simple caricatures. I weave into their identities this notion of feminism that is integrated with their other ideals and views, and they walk into the room in a complex way. Identity is complicated, and feminism is complicated because there are still so many issues in our society that challenge women's roles in society. We have to integrate who we are—as women of color, as transgender women, as non-gentile Jewish women—into our beliefs about our rights as women because we don't walk out the door in sections. It has a parallel to my notion of mixed race. You can't fragment yourself and walk in or out of the door. You walk out the door as one whole being.

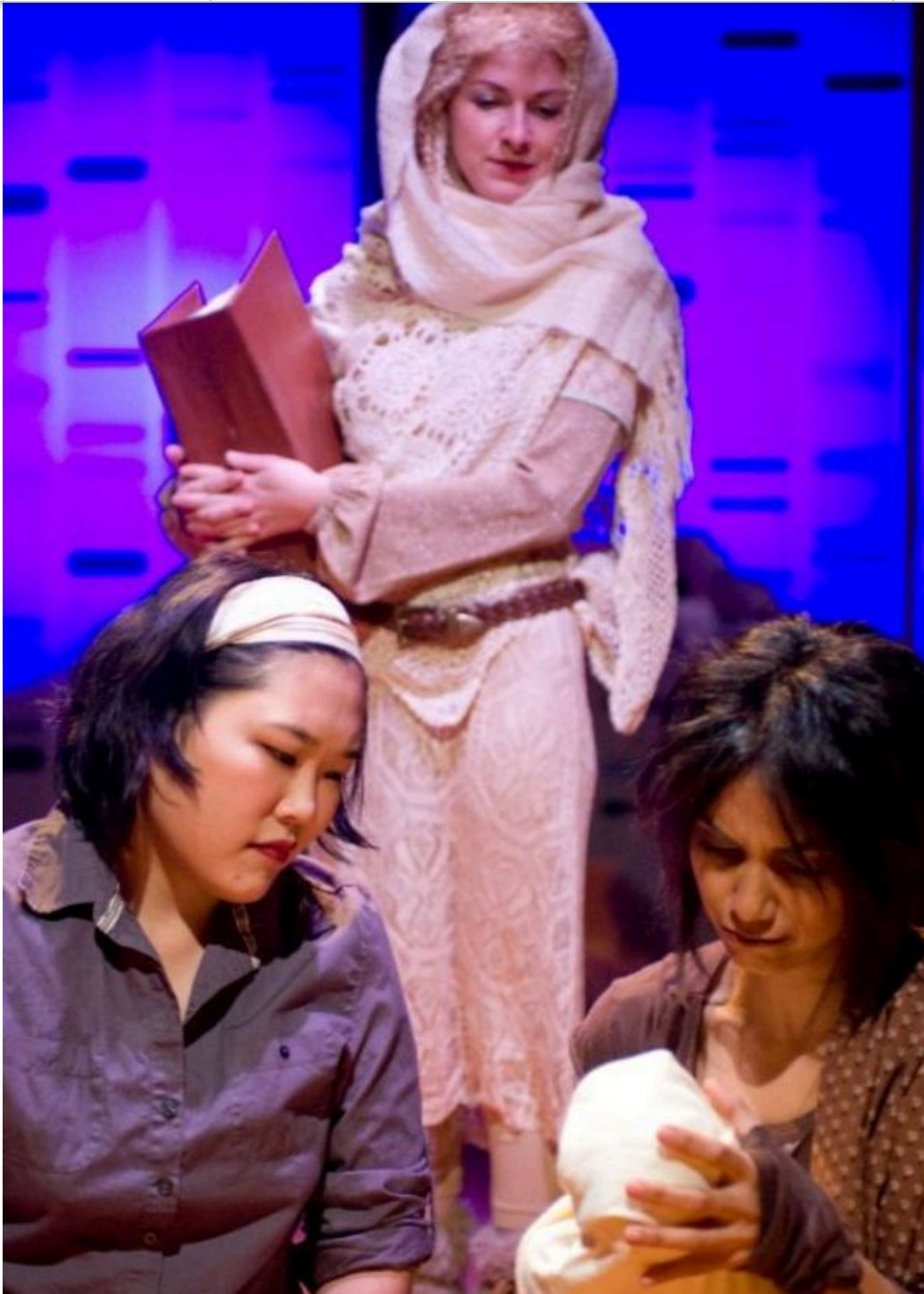


Silk Road Rising is proud to have produced the Midwest Premiere of Velina's celebrated play, *Tea*, in 2004.

Tasneem: Please tell us a story of a time when someone surprised you because they supported you or demonstrated compassion towards you even though you expected otherwise.

Her name was Phyllis Mustard. She was my kindergarten teacher, a white female, born and raised in the state of Kansas. You would think

she was not. This is how I found out. I was five years old, and I hadn't had any lunch. She came out towards me as I was sitting in the playground, and I thought, "Oh no, I'm going to get in trouble because I'm the only one outside." She sat down beside me with her rather severe cat-eye glasses. But she merely wanted to know what was the matter. She took my hand and walked me to the school cafeteria, and she got me food. I specifically remember—because I had never had them before these animal cookies that had pink icing on them. She got an apple for me, and she expected me to bite into it like an American would, but in Japanese culture, all fruit is peeled; even grapes. So she helped me slice the apple so I could eat it, and she got me a sandwich. And she sat with me. She sat with me as I had lunch, and we became friends after that.



In 2010, Silk Road Rising produced Velina's short play, *Mother Road*, as part of the World Premiere of *The DNA Trail: A Genealogy of Short Plays about Ancestry, Identity, and Utter Confusion*.



Polycultural
Institute

Connecting People, Cultures, and Communities

**Exploring Yussef El Guindi's *Ten Acrobats*
in an Amazing Leap of Faith with Play Club**



Silk Road Rising produced the World Premiere of Yussef El Guindi's *Ten Acrobats* in 2005. We are excited to revisit a play from our early years.

PLAY CLUB

Join us this Friday, December 15th from 6:00 pm - 7:30 pm CST for Play Club's virtual December conversation with playwright Yussef El Guindi and Silk Road Rising's Jamil Khoury to discuss El Guindi's play, *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith*.

Play Club is a cross-generational community of curious people who

Conversation.

Use the code **CURTAINSUP** for a discount on a Play Club membership.*

*Membership is required to participate.

[Click here to learn more about Play Club](#)

Wishing You a Joyous Holiday Season!

From our family to yours, may this glorious time of year bring an abundance of blessings and grace.



Founding Co-Executive Artistic Directors, Malik Gillani (right) and Jamil Khoury (left)

Our Office Will Be Closed For the Holidays **December 21, 2022 - January 3, 2023**

We recognize that family time and rest are essential components of our creative and administrative processes.

Silk Road Rising's office will be closed from December 21, 2022 - January 3, 2023, so that our staff may relax and reflect with loved ones during this holiday season. We will re-open on January 4th, revived, reinvigorated, and ready to kick off an exciting new year!

Welcoming, Polycultural, and Dynamic.

**Support a Vision of the World that is
Open, Willing, and Creative.**

**Support Silk Road Rising and
Donate Today**

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