

A Moment of Kismet That Would Change Our World
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Memory Lane: Revisiting *Precious Stones*



On April 14th, Silk Road Rising hosted a long-sought reunion with the playwright, director, and actors from our inaugural production of *Precious Stones*.

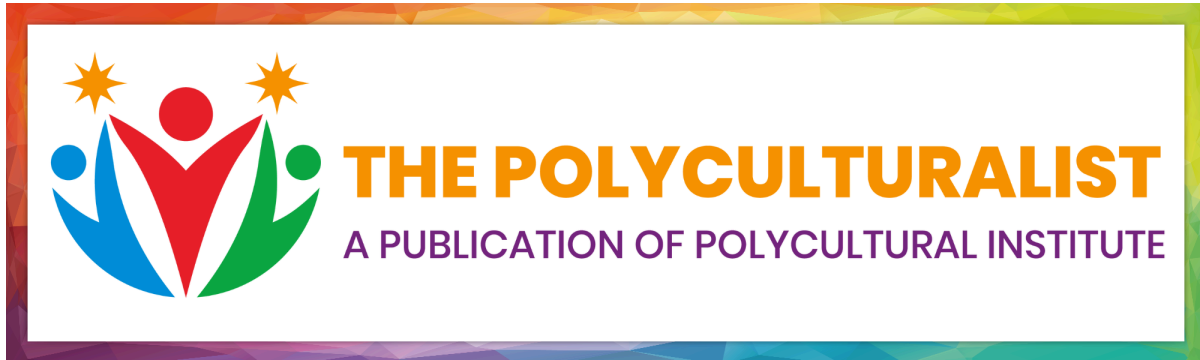
Moderated by Director of Development, Elizabeth Rosner, this stirring conversation reflected on how the process of bringing *Precious Stones* to life still affects those involved two decades later.

Panelists included playwright Jamil Khoury, director Michael Malek Najjar, and actors Roxane Assaf-Lynn and Nicole Pitman.



Panelists

Roxane Assaf-Lynn
Jamil Khoury
Michael Malek Najjar



Our latest offering of *The Polyculturalist* features playwright Lyra Nalan.

Transnational Living with Lyra Nalan

This interview was conducted on September 28 2022, by Dr. Tasneem Mandviwala, Polycultural Institute's Advisory Council Coordinator.

Tasneem: From your experience as a Chinese playwright living and working in the US, how do you think polyculturalism can enter theatre spaces in ways that promote artistic honesty and cultural connectivity?



Lyra: As an emerging Chinese artist, I have struggled to tell stories that are relatable and meaningful to audiences in the US. I find myself having to defend my voice and having to hold hands with audiences who are not familiar with my culture. Sometimes, I do feel the urge to challenge them, though, hoping they will do their own research to understand more or to ask questions. Consequently, I think polyculturalism is really empowering and freeing. I usually have to do

more explaining, but with polyculturalism, it puts more pressure on the audience. It encourages me to tell stories that do not necessarily fit the audience's expectations. I feel like I have more power and therefore more connection to the story I want to tell.



Tasneem: In addition to writing plays, you also write short stories. Can you discuss a story that illuminates how you incorporate polycultural ideas into your storytelling?

Lyra: For short stories, I worry less about getting people to like them. For instance, I wrote a story about a sheltered Chinese woman's first Thanksgiving experience in the US. I use a Western road-trip/serial killer story trope, but told from a Chinese woman's point of view. She takes the bus to Brooklyn to spend the holiday with her Resident Assistant, but the bus breaks down on the way. Everyone has to spend the night in a motel, but the girl can't find her wallet. A Russian woman volunteers to share her room with the girl, who then discovers the woman is a sex worker. The girl has all sorts of prejudices regarding sex workers because of the cultural upbringing she's had, but everything changes because of this woman she meets and who helps her when nobody else does. The rest of the story is about this

friendship and how she finds courage to stand up for herself and her new friend against a serial killer.

I was able to incorporate Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish in addition to English into the story because that's how I first felt when I got to the US—there are people speaking different languages from different cultures everywhere. But I think the story is relatable to people regardless of where they are from because it is a scary situation for someone to be alone in a foreign country. Because this story centers on connections between minority cultures, though, I think it makes the story more authentic and charming.



A 2019 staged reading of Lyra's *Paper Dream* produced by Avant Bard Theatre in Arlington, VA.

Tasneem: As someone who has been part of the racial majority in China and part of a racial minority in the US, what lived lessons do you think polyculturalism can teach us about “majority” and “minority” experiences?

Lyra: I think it makes me realize “majority” and “minority” are relative. When I was a member of the majority for most of my childhood in China, I thought so little about minority problems and challenges. And

when I became a minority in the US, I started to think about the problems because I was not treated like the majority. Meaning, I didn't have some of the privileges that other people had. So the lesson is to always learn to care and engage and to empathize with people who are in the minority in the community, or those who have less privilege, because one day it could be you. Also, being outside of my own group, I learned that there are good parts and bad parts about our cultures and communities. I think overall it's a great experience to have, to experience both being a part of the majority and part of the minority.



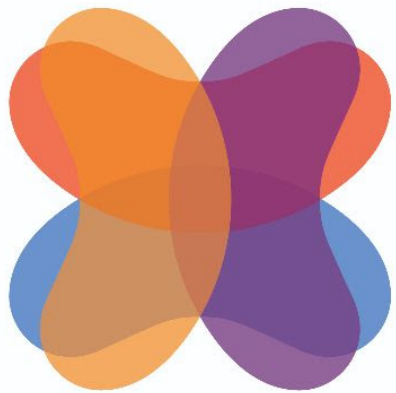
Lyra's short film *Freya* is a coming-of-age drama exploring a Chinese American family's struggles with mental health (2019).

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.

Lyra: One time, when I was studying in Germany, I made a friend who was a girl from Moscow, Russia. We were talking about our financial situations. In my culture, you're supposed to be humble about your money, so even though I had enough to survive back then, I said, "I'm so broke!" This was just something you said to your friends in China; it didn't actually mean you don't have any money. But the girl from Moscow was so concerned, and she was like, "I don't have too many savings, but I want to help you. How much money do you need?" So that was really endearing. It was so nice of her to offer to help! I had only just met her, and we weren't even that close, but her kindness was moving.



Lyra's short film *Evelyn's Bracelet* is a dark teen drama exploring obsessive love and female friendship (2020).



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Institute

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