

# ARENA'S PAGE

## STUDY GUIDE

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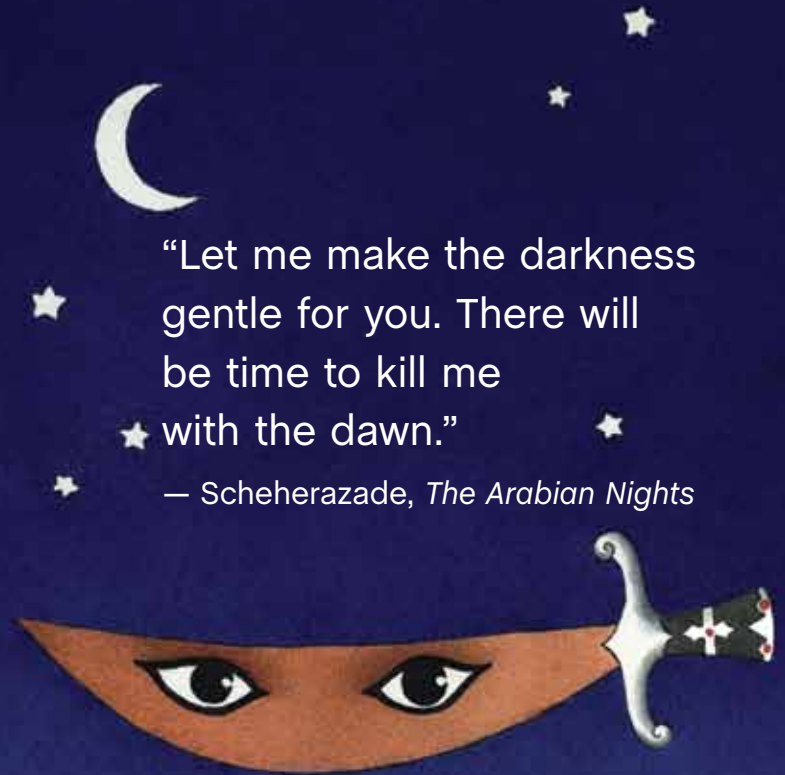
### THE PLAY

Many centuries ago, in the beautiful city of Baghdad, a ruthless king with a broken heart, **Shahryar** (shahay-ray-are), marries and murders one woman every night. His next victim's fate might be different.

A clever girl, **Scheherazade** (sh-hair-i-zodd) can spin enough tales to weave a tapestry. Her stories are full of magic, humor, wonder, and a lesson or two. When she is forced to marry the king, she tries to save her life – and maybe even his – by distracting him with stories.

Like her tales, however, the king is unpredictable. How many sunrises will Scheherazade live to see?

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“Let me make the darkness  
gentle for you. There will  
be time to kill me  
with the dawn.”

— Scheherazade, *The Arabian Nights*

## THE ARABIAN NIGHTS

Now playing in the Fichandler

Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater  
January 20, 2011—February 20, 2011

written and directed by Mary Zimmerman

adapted from *The Book of the  
Thousand Nights and One Night*

in association with Berkeley Repertory Theatre,  
Kansas City Repertory Theatre and  
Lookingglass Theatre Company

## MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT & DIRECTOR



*"I've always loved fairy tales. I think they perhaps led me to theater rather than the other way around."*

— Mary Zimmerman

Mary Zimmerman grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska. As a child, she dreamed of being an actress. She entered Northwestern University as a literature major, but she switched to a performance studies major only two weeks later. She studied acting, directing, and telling and adapting stories for stage.

Zimmerman's works of theater are often adapted from older stories. As a director, she is interested in providing new perspectives on well-known tales. She has adapted productions from classics such as *The Odyssey*. Also a director known for spectacle, her play *Metamorphoses* had a pool of water in the center of the stage.

This season, Zimmerman's work was also seen on another D.C. stage. She adapted and directed the musical *Candide* at the Shakespeare Theatre. ●

*"My goal is to express the play in a way that feels as right as possible. I'm not ever trying to force something on these stories."*

— Mary Zimmerman, playwright & director

## ZIMMERMAN'S PROCESS



Zimmerman is known for the beauty and spectacle of her productions.



When most actors walk into a first rehearsal, they expect to receive a script. At a first rehearsal with Mary Zimmerman, however, the script is nowhere to be found. She says, "My imagination doesn't work that way."

"No script" does not mean "no plan." Zimmerman began *The Arabian Nights* having researched the text and knowing which stories she'd like to tell. She had met with designers to develop a concept or world for the piece. With this framework in place, she then worked with the actors. This work in rehearsal provided further inspiration and images to help her shape the story into a final, but flexible, script.

Because of her collaborative style, Zimmerman chooses actors who work well as an ensemble. She auditions actors in groups of 10 or 12 to observe how they improvise and cooperate with others. She also seeks actors who move well. The actors often don't know what roles they will play. This emerges during the creation process.

This approach results in a style that is known for being open, fluid, lively and rich in images.

One scene in *The Arabian Nights*, "The Wonderful Bag," is improvised by the actors each performance!

**a!** **ACTIVITY:** If you were a theater artist like Mary Zimmerman, what fairy tale or well-known story would you produce? Write a scene that is adapted from a book or a fairy tale. Jot down what your set, costumes and makeup will look like.

*"How will I ever sleep without your stories?"* — Duniyazade, *The Arabian Nights*

## TRADITION OF STORYTELLING

Thousands of years ago in the Arabic world, not everyone could read classical Arabic. As a result, stories were passed from person to person by word of mouth.

In the Middle East, traditional storytellers are called *hakawati*. This word is derived from the Lebanese word "haki," which means "talk" or "conversation." Hakawatis traveled between villages and cafés, telling well-known stories. Some modern hakawatis continue to entertain listeners with their traditional Arab epics, incorporating costumes and props into their performances.

**a!** **ACTIVITY:** Tell a group story. Each person is only allowed to contribute one word at a time to the story. Take turns creating sentences together and come up with a tale of your own.

“Let it be one thousand nights and one night before you grow weary of me.”

— Scheherazade, *The Arabian Nights*

# ORIGINS OF THE STORY

Mary Zimmerman's *The Arabian Nights* is based on an ancient compilation of stories from India, Persia, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. This collection of legends, fairy tales, romances, adventures, and anecdotes is called by a number of similar names, including *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*.

The stories were written over centuries by many authors and passed down orally. They were compiled into a Persian book around 225 BCE. These legends were translated into Arabic around 850 BCE, into French in the early 1700s, and into English in the early 1800s.

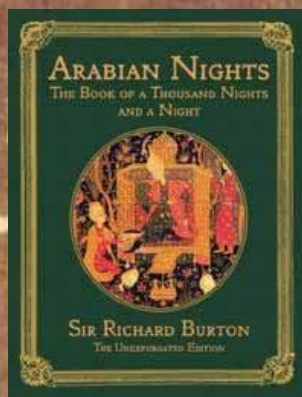
Even though the collection of stories is thousands of years old, it continues to inspire countless writers and artists. Each adaptation reflects a different interpretation of the stories.

For the director, Mary Zimmerman, “if it’s about anything — it’s about the absolute, lifesaving necessity of storytelling, in a very literal way. The only thing keeping Scheherazade alive is that her stories are interesting

enough to prevent the king from killing her. But in another, deeper way, she is saving his life. ... By telling these stories, she’s taking someone who’s in a state of trauma and depression and gently, gently reintroducing him into the real world from which he has withdrawn.” ●

Contributions by Dr. Esmail Koushanpour and Jennifer Leininger, courtesy of Lookingglass Theatre

**a!** **ACTIVITY:** What are some stories you hear often? Research the origin of these stories and how they were passed down from person to person. How and why have they changed over time?



An illustration by Edmund Dulac from a 1907 adaptation, *Stories from the Arabian Nights*.

*“We wanted to go back to uniting audience and play in one room, in one emotional environment.”*

— Zelda Fichandler, co-founder of Arena Stage



The tradition of storytelling is reflected in our very own Fichandler Stage. It is a “theater-in-the-round,” where the audience sits on all four sides of the stage.

Arena Stage co-founder Zelda Fichandler notes that “the idea was to take the theater back to its tribal beginnings, when someone said, ‘Gather round me and let me tell you how it happened.’” In this way, the physical structure of the theater echoes the ancient practice of gathering around to hear a story.



## Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early.  
Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum.

Do not use cell phones for calls, text messages, pictures or games.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

**Enjoy the show!**



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Visit [www.arenastage.org](http://www.arenastage.org)  
for more information on  
Arena Stage productions  
and educational opportunities.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Books/Plays

*The Arabian Nights: A Companion* by Robert Irwin (1994)

*The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia* by Ulrich Marzolph, Richard van Leeuwen and Hassan Wassouf (2004)

### On the Web

Read the tales: [www.arabiantales.org](http://www.arabiantales.org)

Listen to a clip of storytelling: [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10139009](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10139009)

Watch a clip of Zimmerman's process: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxiaGSa8kb4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxiaGSa8kb4)

### On DVD

*The Arabian Nights* from Lionsgate (2001)