

THE SHAHRAZAD SOCIETY — CONCEPT

By Ramón Esquivel

The Shahrazad Society meets secretly to share forbidden stories. Why do they do this?

This play was inspired by Malala Yousafzai, the activist for girls education in Pakistan and around the world. She was shot by the Taliban just as I revisited *One Thousand and One Nights*, stories that I loved growing up, and taught in my classes for years. Malala's work made me realize that the literary Shahrazad saved herself and others through education—her intelligence, knowledge, and storytelling skill. There is power and agency in storytelling. The storytellers in the play interpret tales from *One Thousand and One Nights* not often remembered for having strong female roles. It is implied that they will do the same with other “forbidden” literature and banned books too. My hope is that the tales they tell subvert patriarchy, offer feminist and queer alternatives to storytelling conventions, while also retaining the intrigue and charm that made them classics in the first place.

I gutted and rewrote the script after a development workshop at New York University. Originally titled *Shahrazad 1001*, the first drafts centered on Shahrazad herself, her sister Dunyazad, and other women in the royal harem. That version was deeply flawed because I tried to capture sacred spaces of a culture that is not my own, and to tell a story of Muslim women that is not mine to tell. This version, *The Shahrazad Society*, is closer to my first inspiration. Growing up in the Pacific Northwest, I didn't encounter many books, films, plays, or shows that featured characters like me: Latino, Yaqui Indian, queer, chubby, and so on. So I found pieces of myself in characters and stories, imagining changes that reflected my own culture, experiences, and worldview. I made the stories my own.

I have given production teams a great deal of flexibility in choosing a setting, though this revision has narrowed it down to a “strict, religious school or college.” A director, team of dramaturges, and ensemble of actors will help me focus on these elements of the frame story, as well as to tighten the tales themselves. I envision the storytellers as teenagers like Malala Yousafzai, or university students like those in Azar Nafisi's book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. But really, I think of the reality today of libraries and schools in the United States that are banning books. What do they find so threatening about knowledge and stories? This is what unites the members of The Shahrazad Society.

My hope for the Collaborative Theatre Project is to be able to start seeing the play in the context of a full-production. The most important thing is to capture the sense of play that comes from friends getting together, especially in the middle of the night, and entertaining each other. So rather than have elaborate costumes, how would these storytellers make a “costume” out of sheets in a laundry room, or the contents of a custodial closet, or the storage attic of a school? How can you design to make everything seem spontaneous? To enhance the actors' performances with just enough magic to ignite the audience's imagination? How can we design a production that will make audience members want to go home and tell their own stories through theatre?