

## Lewiston theater hopes play about immigrant experience draws new audience members

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*The Public Theatre is staging a production of 'Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World' and has been doing outreach to encourage the immigrant community to come see it.*

Christopher Schario and Janet Mitchko, co-artistic directors of The Public Theatre in Lewiston, have long wanted to stage a production of Yussef El Guindi's play "Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World."

The couple first met El Guindi back in the 1980s when they were all students together at Carnegie Mellon University School of Drama in Pittsburgh, and they have closely followed his career, which has produced a dozen original plays and counting.

"We knew of his work, but when I read this one, it knocked me out. I couldn't get it out of my head," Schario said.

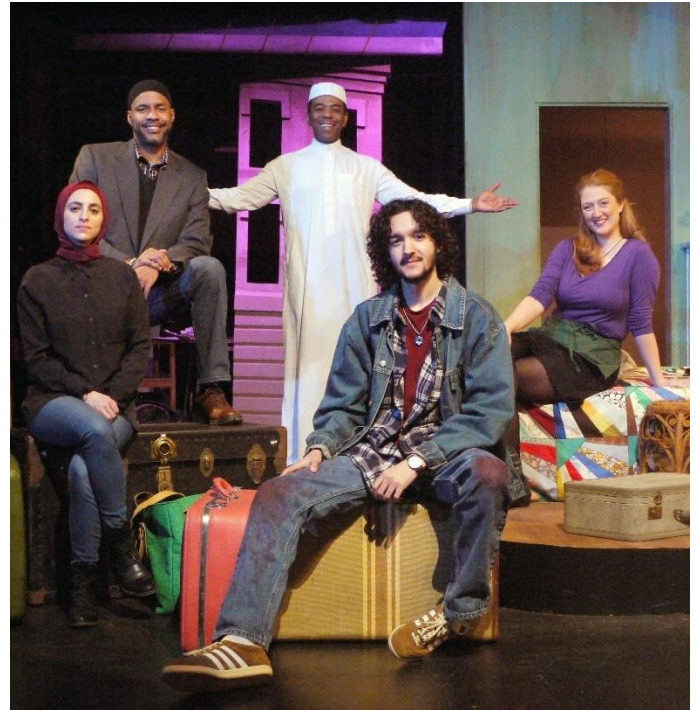
At its core, the play is a tender love story, but the characters have cultural backgrounds that reflect an increasingly diverse America – one that is not always depicted on stage. When The Public Theatre decided to include the show in its 2023 season, Schario and Mitchko saw an opportunity to engage with the vibrant immigrant community in Lewiston and beyond.

"We didn't pick the play for that reason, we were going to do it anyway," said Schario, who will direct the production. "But the immigrant community in Lewiston, which has become quite diverse, we've always had the goal of doing more to reach that community."

What better way than to present a play with characters that look and sound like the audiences you're trying to reach?

Ahead of the play's opening on Friday (it runs through March 12), The Public Theatre sought out several local immigrant community groups, including the Somali Bantu Community Association, Maine Community Integration, and Maine Immigrant and Refugee Services.

"I was surprised because I had no past experience with them," said Mohamad Ibrahim, a community organizer with Maine People's Alliance who read the script. "Honestly, I didn't even know what the theater even did. Sometimes, I might pass the building and see that the parking lot is packed, so I knew something going on. But it hasn't really been connected to the (immigrant) community."



*The cast of "Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World," by Egyptian-American playwright Yussef El Guindi. The production runs from March 3-12 at The Public Theatre in Lewiston. Photo by Janet Mitchko, courtesy of The Public Theatre*

Ibrahim said this production could be a way to build that bridge. He plans to go with several friends and has helped The Public Theatre with outreach to try to get others to buy tickets to the show.

El Guindi, who lives in Seattle, said he's thrilled to have one of his plays staged in Maine for the first time, especially in a community where residents might feel a closer connection with the characters.

"I certainly hope it helps create a more diverse audience," he said. "But I'm always grateful for anyone who shows up."

#### UNIQUE WORLD, UNIVERSAL EXPERIENCES

El Guindi said he's drawn to writing stories that mirror his own, at least in part.

He was born in Egypt but emigrated with his family to England at age 3. He returned to his birth country years later to attend college, but then found himself at a crossroads.

It wasn't until years later, when he became a United States citizen, that he understood why.

"It was a really pointed moment for me coming out of my naturalization ceremony, thinking there was a before and an after," he explained. "It hit me that I was now a part of the immigrant narrative of this country."

In England, El Guindi said, he felt like a foreigner, and in Egypt, he was seen as too English. In the U.S., he found a home alongside so many others who have been drawn here from other places for centuries now.

At Carnegie Mellon, a renowned theater school, he found his calling as a playwright, and he's built a resume of stories that are rooted in the experiences of immigrants, often from Arab and Muslim countries.

One of El Guindi's first plays, "Back of the Throat," premiered three years after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and explored the rise in anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment in the U.S., a sentiment that still lingers.

The three main characters in "Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World" are all immigrants from Muslim countries – Musa, an Egyptian cab driver and semi-practicing Muslim, and his two friends, Tayyib from Somalia and Abdullah from Sudan, who are more devout. Another main character, Gamila, is Egyptian-American.

Sheri, a free-spirited waitress, is the only white character in the New York-set play.

Schario said that, although The Public Theatre hopes to reach new audiences, the story is universal. Musa is torn between a relationship with Gamila, who shares his religion and culture, and Sheri, who isn't right for him on paper but who draws him in anyway.

"It's unique in terms of the world the characters come from, but it's not unique in the conflict the characters experience," he said. "It's really a story about human relationships and people falling in and out of love."

El Guindi's plays don't just create opportunities for new audiences but for actors who haven't always been considered for parts because of their ethnic or racial background. None of the actors in the upcoming production at The Public Theatre has acted in Maine before, and some are immigrants themselves.

“There was a time period when my career as a playwright started, a friend said, ‘You’re writing plays for actors who don’t yet exist,’ ” he said. “So, it took a while for those actors to come up in the ranks, but now there are more opportunities.”

#### DRAWING AUDIENCES, NEW AND OLD

The Public Theatre was founded in 1991 in Lewiston, amid some skepticism that it could succeed in the blue-collar mill town.

Two years later, the organization became an equity theater – which means it hires actors from the professional actors’ union – and brought in Schario and Mitchko to lead. The couple have been there ever since. Each year, the theater produces between six and eight shows at the Ritz Theater, a historic former auto garage-turned-movie house that seats 300 people.

The theater directors have watched Lewiston grow during that time, from a mostly white, French-Canadian community, to a more racially and culturally diverse place, starting in the early 2000s with the arrival of many Somali immigrants.

Schario said what’s been interesting to him more recently is that the first generation of immigrants from 25 years ago are now elders. Their children are grown with children of their own.

“I think the community is completely different than 20 years ago,” agreed Ibrahim, who emigrated from the East African country of Djibouti in 2012. “It’s more open, more understanding and more connected to the mainstream.”

That hasn’t, however, always extended to things like theater.

“I have seen some changes,” Ibrahim said, recalling recent music events that have featured American-born and immigrant musicians sharing a stage. “I do think it’s changing, but very slowly.”

The Public Theatre, like most theaters in Maine and elsewhere, is still working to bring back audiences – older patrons, especially – that have stayed away during the prolonged pandemic and are slowly returning. So Schario doesn’t know what to expect when “Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World” opens Friday.

“We’ll see at the box office,” he said. “It’s true almost every time you pick a play, you’re trying to find people for whom it might resonate.

“But this show with its title in our community, it will be fascinating to see what happens.”