

## Long Wharf And IRIS Make A Unicorn

by BRIAN SLATTERY | Jun 5, 2018 2:51 pm



ELIZABETH NEARING PHOTO Azhar Ahmed.

Azhar Ahmed fled the war in Sudan in 2004. For a decade she lived with her husband in Cairo, working as a teacher and applying for refugee status in the United States. In June 2015 she and her husband finally arrived in New Haven. Her son was born six months ago, in a friend's house.

"You have to start from the beginning," she said, of her experience of arriving in the United States.

Friday, she and six other refugees will do just that, weaving their stories together in *The American Unicorn*, a collaboration between [Long Wharf Theatre](#) and [Integrated Refugee and Immigration Services](#).

The show — sponsored by the International Association of New Haven and The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven — happens June 8 at 7 p.m., at Long Wharf Theatre on Sargent Drive.

The idea for *American Unicorn* began two and a half years ago, when Elizabeth Nearing, Long Wharf Theatre's community engagement manager, called IRIS with an interest in collaborating. IRIS was interested.

"They do a lot of work beyond what most resettlement agencies do," Nearing said, working with refugees for a long time after they arrive in the United States and helping them find housing, jobs, and classes to get their footing in their new community. The organization's work dovetailed with Nearing's own passions. "I'm a theater maker by background and training," she said. "I'm always thinking about how we can use the process and the art and the product to make the world a better place?"

Nearing learned of other efforts around the country in which refugee agencies and theater groups had worked together to create productions. With support from Theatre Communications Group Audience Revolutions, she, Long Wharf Managing Director Joshua Borenstein, and IRIS Director of Education and Employment Will Kneerim visited theaters in Washington, D.C. and Seattle.

"We learned just how flexible we have to be to make these stories as successful as they can be" when translated to the stage, Nearing said.

Nine months ago, Long Wharf started workshops at the Ives branch of the public library on Elm Street, meeting IRIS clients who were interested in participating in the project. They began with a couple dozen people. Some had arrived eight years ago; some as recently as last year. Nearing met with each of them one on one. "Do you want to make a play with us?" she asked.



Chaghlil.

The cast narrowed to seven: Azhar Ahmed and Lames Ahmed from Sudan; Joseph Kazadi, Mariame Kazadi, and Drysile Kazadi from Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mohamad Chaghlil from Syria, and Ruben Kwigwasa from South Africa. They met in workshops again to talk about plays and play structures. Everyone taught each other dances from their countries of origin. With guidance from Nearing and co-director Aurelia Clunie, they “put together a script for the stories we collected over the workshop,” Nearing said.

That was in February. And “maybe one or two things from the original script are left,” Nearing said with a laugh. “The ensemble has shaped what it looks like.

Perhaps more important — and explaining the title of the piece — is that “there’s an element of mythology woven in,” Nearing said. The mythology helped tie the cast members’ different stories together, and also got at the strength of the emotions involved in their experiences. “The feeling is often of mythological proportions — the search for hope,” which could seem as elusive sometimes as finding a unicorn, Nearing said. “They didn’t choose to be refugees.”

Alongside those flashes of hope, “Medusa shows up — when fear is petrifying,” Nearing said. The unicorn and Gorgon together give a sense of the wide emotional borders the play works within. The mythology helped the cast members weave their stories together, finding the common elements among them, so that the piece wasn’t just a series of monologues. The cast members all help each other tell their stories.



Lames Ahmed.

The age range of the cast, especially Lames Ahmed, who is 10 (“10 going on 35,” Nearing said), helped as well. “Sometimes having a kid around gives adults permission to use their imagination,” Nearing said, and find levity in a serious topic.

While providing parameters for the piece and allowing the cast members to “place stories in a structure,” Nearing said, the mythology also “pinpointed moments for people” — flashes of hope alongside times of despair, “that moment when choice is lost.”

Nearing hopes that the cast’s individual stories will confound stereotypes people may have about refugees. “Whatever picture people have in their heads of ‘this is what a refugee is,’ our ensemble gets that and wants to prove it wrong,” she said. “So much of my job is putting a microphone up to some really incredible things.”

Like Azhar Ahmed’s story, which begins in the Nuba Mountains. We follow her as she flees Khartoum, then waits with her husband in Cairo, then lands in New Haven, and has her son.

Ahmed agrees with Nearing about the need to tell stories to chip away at people’s preconceptions. “I have to do it because I want to show other people why you become a refugee. Some people, they don’t know,” she said. “They think, if you are a refugee, you don’t have anything in your country, that you are poor.”

But that’s not always true. She and her husband both have university degrees, she in law, he in accounting. “You have to leave everything behind,” she said.

With help from IRIS, she and her husband are now rebuilding their lives, working and studying, learning English, and raising a family all at the same time. And when she gets in front of the audience at Long Wharf on Friday, she said, “I will play my story.”

The American Unicorn *plays at Long Wharf, 222 Sargent Dr., June 8 at 7 p.m.*  
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