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Long Wharf Theatre, IRIS join forces for “The American Unicorn’ June 8

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Photo: Courtesy Of Long Wharf Theatre

Mother and daughter Azhar Ahmed and Lames Ahmed at Long Wharf Theatre.

Among the myriad, clarion voices speaking out on the subject of immigration in our country, relatively few are those of the immigrants themselves. Long Wharf Theatre and IRIS have joined forces to share these stories with “The American Unicorn,” a performance piece written by seven refugees who’ve settled in New Haven. It will be performed June 8 at 7 p.m. at Long Wharf.

“This initiated with Long Wharf Theatre approaching us,” said Ann O’Brien, communications director at IRIS, a nonprofit refugee resettlement program in New Haven. “A number of their employees have volunteered with us, and they had heard about this initiative around the nation of theaters working with different populations and not-for-profits to create completely unique theater that was not just inspired by, but acted out by the populations themselves.”

“The American Unicorn,” which is sponsored by the International Association of New Haven as part of The Newcomers Project and Theatre Communications Group, consists of monologues and scenes written and performed by Azhar Ahmed (Sudan), Lames Ahmed (Sudan), Joseph

Kazadi (Democratic Republic of the Congo), Mohamad Chaghilil (Syria), Yar Jan Ahmadzai (Afghanistan/Pakistan), Balquis Ahmadzai (Afghanistan/Pakistan), and Ruben Kwigwasa (South Africa). Long Wharf staff members Elizabeth Nearing and Aurelia Clunie, along with dramaturg Madeline Charne, helped shape and stage their stories.

Nearing, Long Wharf's community engagement manager, said her team has collaborated with IRIS on "American Unicorn" for a year and a half, when members of both Long Wharf and IRIS scouted similar projects across the country.

"(Then) we started workshops in September and we had sort of 'open calls,'" said Nearing, "and we talked about what a play could be and making something of their own. Then, in about January, we sat down with everyone who came to workshops who might be interested in taking the project further."

Will Kneerim, IRIS's employment and education services director, described the project as "an interesting opportunity in so many ways for our clients." He and O'Brien did much of the heavy lifting during the initial phase of the endeavor. They identified who among their clients could logistically participate in the project. Such factors to consider, Kneerim said, included one's interest in writing and performing the final piece, scheduling, and one's proficiency in speaking English, among many others.

"As you can imagine, life for so many of our clients is fraught with challenges, especially during the first year or two when people are paying rent, holding down sometimes multiple jobs, (and) dealing with schools and hospitals," said Kneerim. "It takes time to lock in participants for a long program and project.

"If everyone who was interested was able to participate we would have a group of 30 or 40. We were well aware of this challenge even before the project started. Which is: if you're hoping to meet with a large group once every two weeks for many months, it will be so dependent upon such things as child care, work schedules, transportation needs. ... It's hard to hold on to all the people you'd like to hold on to.

Kneerim added that though he and O'Brien were thoroughly involved in the administrative side of the project, they happily got out of their clients' way as they crafted their play with the Long Wharf gang.

"I can tell you that I, personally, have no idea of what 'American Unicorn' will really be about," he said. "And that's the way it should be. Let me preface this just by saying over the last couple of years there's been so much press about refugee resettlement, immigration in America, and, thanks to our location near New York, near Yale, we've received a lot of press. Most of it very

positive; some of it negative. But it sometimes has been sort of an onus to many of our clients who feel they have to show up at different events and talk about their culture, and tell their stories. That's often an opportunity that people welcome, but it can also be overwhelming, and many of our clients don't want to have their picture anywhere online, don't want to do anything public, because they have family members who can be put in danger by that. And there's sort of the burnout and fatigue that goes with being the 'hot commodity,' a group of people that the media and the public at large are interested in.

“So it was very clear, not only from the grant, but the approach that Elizabeth Nearing and the Long Wharf team took that they were going to make sure that it was the IRIS clients that decided what would happen. They would talk about whether the production they were making would be based on experiences they had here, or from their home countries, or a totally different kind of storytelling. And so they guided it and decided what the content would be, which is, from our perspective, exactly as it should be.”



Nearing said that the play's format is a fable of scenes and monologues serving the theme of "home."

“So what we did over the course of our time is develop not only stories they want to tell, but also the structure through which they want to tell those stories. And through that we came up with the image of the unicorn. In the play, the opposite of the unicorn is the Medusa,” said Nearing, referring to the monster in Greek mythology with a coil of living, venomous snakes. If the unicorn represents safety and order, Medusa provides the metaphor of “paralyzing fear,” as Nearing described it.

“That provided a language to talk about the hardest stories, and to tap into the gravity of how important hope can be and how scary fear can be,” she said. “So the structure of the play goes from what home meant. It’s about the journey to a new home and trying to find a new, American unicorn.”

Joseph Kazadi, whose previous theatrical experience consists of acting in primary school back in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, said the staff members at IRIS and Long Wharf “helped me by giving me real advice for (creating the piece) and assured me that I am not obliged to do that according to our identity.”

According to Kneerim, the project benefits many people, including lifelong residents of the United States.

“The simple answer is a word we use a lot around here: acculturation,” he said. “For our clients who are involved in this, they are learning things that, even if you’ve been around for a couple of years, they had no idea existed in America.”

Among these possibilities are cultural and civic opportunities that connect refugees with their new communities and its different groups of people.

“And I think other people participating, whether it be Long Wharf staff, or a couple of volunteers who’ve been involved, some people in the world of IRIS — volunteers, interns, staff members — get the same kind of benefit,” Kneerim said. “And what an advantage it is to know different members of the community who are involved in theater, in fundraising, in awareness and education, and bring our clients in that world.

“So, I think it’s been advantageous for a lot of different people, but certainly for our clients who are involved. Their horizons have been broadened about what’s possible in America, in Connecticut, in New Haven itself.”

The performance will take place June 8 at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$20 and are available at longwharf.org or by calling 203-787-4282.

<https://www.nhregister.com/entertainment/article/Long-Wharf-Theatre-IRIS-join-forces-for-The-12961959.php>