

Women’s Voices Naturally Rise to the Top at Golden Thread by Maddie Gaw, ReOrient Publications Dramaturg

As a team member of the first-time partnership between Golden Thread and [Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas](#), Publications Dramaturg Maddie Gaw interviews playwrights Betty Shamieh (*Make No Mistake*), E.H. Benedict, (*War on Terror*), and Torange Yeghiazarian (*Thanksgiving at Khodabakhshian’s*) to discuss their writing careers as women and in the Bay Area, and experiences with Golden Thread.



ABOUT MADDIE GAW

Maddie Gaw is a dramaturg, writer, producer, and arts administrator. She is the Literary Manager at Playwrights Foundation and the Development Associate at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. In the Bay Area Maddie has also worked with Marin Theatre Company, American Conservatory Theater, The Custom Made Theatre Co., 6NewPlays, and foolsFURY Theater Company. She is a proud member of LMDA.



Pictured (l to r): Betty Shamieh (photo by Lisa Keating), E.H. Benedict, and Torange Yeghiazarian (photo by Navid G. Maghami).

The theatrical landscape in 2017 is abuzz with talk about racial and gender parity, and who gets a seat at the table on and off stage. While many theatres are struggling to address issues of equity and authenticity, San Francisco’s Golden Thread Productions has tackled them head-on from the start. As the first American theatre company focused on the Middle East, their central mission is “to produce passionate and provocative plays from and about the Middle East that celebrate the multiplicity of its perspectives and identities.” The company takes a chance on writers regardless of culture, age, or gender. It gives writers a platform for their stories, a community, and a place where their work can be taken seriously. Nowhere is this more evident than in the biennial ReOrient Festival of Short Plays. Of the seven short plays featured in this year’s festival, five have been written by women and five have been written by writers of Middle Eastern descent.

I had the pleasure of speaking with the three Bay Area writers of ReOrient – all women – and our conversation ranged from building careers as playwrights, sexism and ageism in the American theatre, and the specific resources a partnership like the one between Golden Thread and LMDA can provide for writers. All three playwrights — Betty Shamieh, E.H. Benedict, and Golden Thread’s Founding Artistic Director Torange

Yeghiazarian — are veterans of the festival going back years before this work was part of the national theatre conversation.

Yeghiazarian founded Golden Thread in 1996 to support her graduate thesis at San Francisco State University. While for many years Golden Thread lacked a permanent venue, the theatre was a destination for playwrights and new works. Shamieh, who was born in San Francisco, says, “I consider the Bay Area very much a cultural home.” Her short play *Tamam* premiered in the 2002 ReOrient Festival, during the early stages of her career. “I had a place to do very political work,” post-September 11, Shamieh explains, when many other theatres shied away from any work about the Middle East. “History is going to give [Golden Thread] their due for taking on the revolutionary and relevant voices of our time.”

Nora el Samahy in Betty Shamieh’s *Tamam*, when it was restaged for ReOrient 2009 to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the festival. Photo by Gohar Barseghyan.



Benedict, who came to playwriting after decades as an actor in New York and the Bay Area, is not of Middle Eastern descent, but has nevertheless described Golden Thread as her biggest producing collaborator as a playwright here in the Bay Area. She met Yeghiazarian around 2006, and years later her play *Orhan* was included in the 2012 ReOrient Festival. “It’s a very open community of good folks,” Benedict says, one that really nurtured her Bay Area writing career.



A production shot of Benedict’s play *Orhan* in ReOrient 2012. Pictured: Shores Alaudini, whose voice is featured in *Shelter*, ReOrient 2017.

For Yeghiazarian, Shamieh, and Benedict, their personal artistic journeys have aligned — and not aligned — in different and specific ways. “Things have changed tremendously since I started 20 years ago,” Yeghiazarian says. One of the crucial reasons she founded her own company was the ignorance, and more importantly, the indifference she saw from the community at large when it came to her perspective as a Middle Eastern woman. “When you are ignored, there’s not much you can do.”

Yeghiazarian realized that while individuals can be ignored, groups can command attention. Golden Thread’s identity as a home for artists who identified themselves collectively as Middle Eastern American was no accident; Yeghiazarian cites other culturally-specific theatre coalitions like Latinx Americans or Asian-Pacific Islander Americans as a model, which “helped [Golden Thread] have a bigger voice in the American theatre.”

That voice is a specifically Middle Eastern one that Golden Thread has cultivated throughout its 21-year history, and which has directly led to a large contingent of emerging Middle Eastern artists who are no longer treated with the indifference Yeghiazarian experienced. “They are met with excitement and curiosity,” she says.

Shamieh remarks that early on, she felt her identity as a Palestinian-American playwright served as a significant barrier to getting more work done. “As I age,” she says, with numerous productions under her belt, “I now find that being a woman playwright is inherently more challenging.” Shamieh has come to this conclusion largely from observing other artists, particularly directors. “Men are allowed to fail early in their career, and they are given the resources to grow,” pointing out that women often aren’t afforded the same luxury.

Benedict also observes that age, as it intersects with gender, is even more crucial when it comes to barriers and can create certain challenges. Benedict turned to writing as an alternative creative outlet when she found she had reached a “glass ceiling of age” in the acting roles made available to her. Taking on the new role of playwright revealed a similar dearth of opportunity. “Older women are not considered worthy of development,” she says, pointing out that there is often a sentiment that “if we were any good, we would have ‘made’ it before now.” She goes on to say that “I get the best response to my plays when I submit blind,” which contributes to her decision to use the initials E.H. instead of her first name Elizabeth.

This is a great Catch-22 in the professional theatre world. With limited development opportunities and resources to go around, people often aren’t willing to risk handing those opportunities to untested writers, without questioning what implicit and systemic biases have led to certain writers remaining untested. Since featuring an abundance of different perspectives in their programming is a key part of their mission, it’s not surprising that Golden Thread consistently provides these and other female playwrights with a place to showcase their voices and supports them with valuable resources.

Shamieh’s *Make No Mistake*, featuring
Atosa Babaooff and Jessica Lea Risco.
Photo by David Allen Studio.



A brand-new resource provided during this year’s ReOrient Festival is a partnership with Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas. Professional and LMDA-affiliated dramaturgs are providing not only rehearsal and script development support, but also critical writing about the festival and its participants. “There’s a real lack of thoughtful, critical and analytical writing about the work [Golden Thread] is doing,” says Yeghiazarian. “There’s been very little written about the festival’s history and its impact.” She says that often when Golden Thread’s body of work is assessed, the focus is on the topical nature of the work rather than its artistic merits.

Shamieh's play *Make No Mistake* and Yeghiazarian's play *Thanksgiving at Khodabakhshian's* have a dramaturg on the creative team, Nakissa Etemad, who is of Iranian descent as well as the Regional VP of the Metro Bay Area Chapter of LMDA. Etemad proposed this partnership to Yeghiazarian, who jumped at the opportunity. "We don't have many dramaturgs that are equipped to support the development of Middle Eastern or Middle Eastern American plays," Yeghiazarian says. She recognizes what a gift it is to work with Etemad, who brings cultural competency along with decades of experience. Shamieh agrees, emphasizing how rare it is for a playwright to work with a dramaturg on a short play, which allowed her to explore the short play as an art form all its own.



Yeghiazarian's *Thanksgiving at Khodabakhshian's*. Pictured (l to r): Lawrence Radecker, Jessica Lea Risco, Atosa Babaoff, Bella Warda. Photo by David Allen Studio.

One common thread that crops up in each woman's play for this year's festival is how people are more alike than different, but that true understanding cannot come unless we acknowledge and confront those differences. "Nothing irritates me more than the idea of tolerance," says Yeghiazarian, who feels that tolerance doesn't always mean understanding or respecting one another. Her play *Thanksgiving* grapples with the question of how exactly people on opposite ends of the political spectrum can find common ground. Shamieh has created writing workshops centered on "writing the other" in an attempt to forge common ground between disparate communities. She has them write from ethnic and gender perspectives that are not their own, rather than engaging in dialogue which can quickly become politically charged and divisive. Benedict, being non-Middle Eastern, actively invited culturally specific input from her actors, which was not only invaluable but necessary in crafting her comedy *War on Terror*. The play explores the absurdity of airline travel shared by all Americans, but dives deeper into the experience of Middle Eastern travelers who are subject to the additional scrutiny of racial profiling.

Golden Thread holds firm to the belief that "immersing yourself in someone else's experience is the best way to appreciate their point of view." Each of these female artists has done that to a T in their work for this year's ReOrient Festival, while never having to sacrifice the integrity of their own personal talent, message, and experiences. Here they have found an artistic home where their challenges are faced, grappled with, and ultimately undermined. Their voices are welcomed and embraced, and their stories weave together like multiple strands to make up the strong, central thread that defines Golden Thread Productions.