

**Golden Thread Productions and  
the African-American Shakespeare Company present**



## The Study Guide

Inspired by Duke Ellington Orchestra's 1963 tour to Iran, *Isfahan Blues* imagines an unlikely friendship between an American jazz musician and an Iranian film star. As they travel together to Isfahan, "the most beautiful city in the world," Jazz inspires them to test the limits of freedom, creativity, and experimentation.

Contrary to today's political stalemate between the U.S. and Iran, this production aims to shed light on a little-known historical moment when a uniquely American art form inspired generations of young Iranian musicians.

### Principal Contributors:

Nakissa Etemad

Amanda J. Lee

Torange Yeghiazarian

The development and production of this world premiere is made possible by **The Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation** and **The William & Flora Hewlett Foundation** 2012 Playwright Commissioning Awards Initiative. This project is supported in part by an award from the **National Endowment for the Arts** and the **Columbia Foundation**.

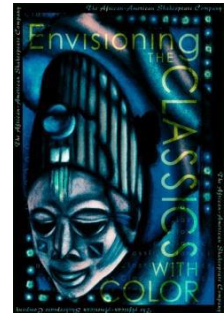
## Table of Contents

Introduction to African-American Shakespeare Company and Golden Thread Productions.....	3
Theatre FAQ's.....	4
<i>Isfahan Blues</i> .....	5
Play Background.....	5
An Iranian Film Star is Born.....	6
America's Goodwill Ambassador.....	7
Civil Rights Movement (A Few Key Movements) .....	8
Pre-Show Suggested Activities.....	9
Post-Show Activities: Discussion.....	9
Resources for Further Exploration.....	10
Glossary of Persian Words.....	11

## African-American Shakespeare Company

### History

African-American Shakespeare Company was introduced in 1994 to open the realm of classic theatre to a diverse audience; and provide an opportunity and place for actors of color to hone their skills and talent in mastering some of the world's greatest classical roles. We do this by producing work from the canon of classical theatre, including Shakespeare and great American and world playwrights that is lively, entertaining and relevant.



### Values

- We create theatrical experiences, which celebrate our pride, diversity and integrity.
- Our work has at its core an African-American aesthetic, steeped in an American sensibility, and a commitment to artistic and cultural experience.
- We value the ability to impart a theatrical knowledge base, teach style and content, and share classical repertoire to under-represented actors and diverse listening audiences.
- We build a sense of community with our audiences, artists, patrons, neighbors and collaborators and see each as essential stakeholders in our company.
- We seek to build long-term personal relationships with all who engage with us and infuse every experience with our company with warmth, caring, and good humor.
- We practice persistence and a can-do attitude.
- Our organization is nimble and flexible.

### Beliefs

- We believe the arts can change perceptions.
- We believe that knowledge of the classics has great potential to empower communities of color.
- We believe the classics should and need to be accessible to historically excluded audiences.
- We believe the African-American community has been alienated from discovering time-favored classics.
- We believe there exists a disparity in arts opportunities and experiences available to people of color, especially youth, and companies such as ours are critical in reducing and eliminating that disparity.

## Golden Thread Productions



### Mission

Golden Thread produces passionate and provocative plays from and about the Middle East that celebrate the multiplicity of its perspectives and identities. We are a developmental catalyst and vibrant artistic home to artists at various stages of their careers. We bring the Middle East to the American stage, creating treasured cultural experiences for audiences of all ages and backgrounds.

### Vision

Through our work, we aim to create a world where the common human experience supersedes cultural and political differences. We define the Middle East broadly and inclusively not by geographical boundaries, but as the shared and evolving experience of the people who have been touched by its tales, melodies and aromas throughout history. The Middle East lives inside us: as we redefine ourselves, we redefine the Middle East.

### Guiding Principles

- Develop and produce innovative works that intrigue, inquire and influence.
- Engage the community in an active dialogue and draw diverse audiences.
- Discover, develop and support Middle Eastern artists.
- Promote the rich texts and diverse performance styles of the Middle East.
- Seek and include the many talents of our diverse community in the production of socially conscious works with a progressive political sensibility.

## Theatre FAQ's

### Q: Who will meet us when we arrive?

A representative of the African-American Shakespeare Company or Golden Thread Productions will meet you in the lobby of the venue. It could be the Executive Director, Artistic Director, Stage Manager, or another volunteer with the organizations.

### Q: Where will we find our seats?

All school matinee shows are general seating on a first come, first serve basis. We like for the schools to check-in when they arrive. By the order of your check-in we will take each group one-by-one into the theater. We will fill out the center seating section first and then the side seating section.

### Q: When should I go to the bathroom?

We encourage all students to use the bathroom before they are seated. Restrooms are located in the lobby area and on the second floor across from the elevators. This show will have a short intermission after Act 1, which will be another good time to use the bathroom.

### Q: What should I do during the show?

We would like for you to take the time to focus your attention on performance. Watch the actors, setting, and other production elements. What we do not want is for you to have conversation with whomever is seated next to you, or to open your phones and begin texting during the show.

### Q: How will I know when the show is about to begin?

The lights will begin to slowly fade in the theater, and this is an indication the show will begin. Our student matinees will also have a curtain speech where someone provides instruction and information on the stage at the top of the show.

### Q: How do I show that I liked what I saw and heard?

One of the most traditional ways is to give applause to the artists. Another important way is to write a letter to the actors or company.

### Q: What do I do after the show ends?

After the actors take their bows and leave the stage they will come back out for a talkback session where you will have a chance to ask them questions about the play.

# Isfahan Blues

Written by **Torange Yeghiazarian**

Original Music Composed by **Marcus Shelby**

Directed by **Laura Hope**

Dramaturgy by **Nakissa Etemad**

Featuring **Vida Ghahremani** and **L. Peter Callender**



Naqsh-e Jahan Square (trans: "Image of the World Square"). Isfahan, Iran

## Play Background

In the fall of 1963, in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement, the government sent Duke Ellington and his orchestra on a three-month State Department goodwill tour. The band visited, in order, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Afghanistan, India, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Pakistan & Bangladesh, Iran, and Iraq. Shows in Turkey, Cypress, the United Arab Republic, Greece, Egypt, and Yugoslavia were cancelled after the assassination of President Kennedy on Nov. 22. The Far East Suite (1967), including the song "Isfahan," arose from the sights and sounds Ellington and his co-composer, Billy Strayhorn absorbed during this trip.

On New Year's Eve 1963-64, Iranian film star, Vida Ghahremani, and her husband, David Yeghiazarian opened Cuccini, one of the first night clubs in Iran. There, they introduced Iranian audiences to live music inspired by American Rhythm & Blues, Rock 'n' Roll, and Jazz. Some of the most prominent and popular Iranian pop stars began their career at Cuccini.



The Zebra Hallway of Club Cuccini in Tehran.



The Black Cats, Club Cuccini's House Band, 1960s.

While this story is inspired by actual events, certain characters, characterizations, incidents, locations and dialogue were fictionalized or invented for purposes of dramatization. Any similarity to actual names, characters, history or incident is entirely for dramatic purposes and not intended to reflect on these.

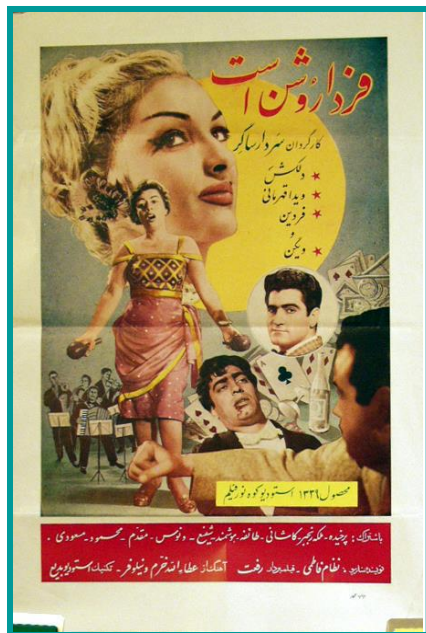
## An Iranian Film Star is Born



Film Still of *Fire and Ashes*, 1961, Vida Ghahremani (right) and Hamideh Kheirabadi (left)

Eager to establish Iran as a political leader and economic powerhouse, the Shah of Iran Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (ruler from 1941-1979) led the nation towards industrialization and social reform modeled after Western democracies. A U.S.-led coup in 1953 re-established the Shah, and in 1963, Iran was considered America's main ally in the region. Iran's young film industry reflected the nation's desire for modernization and freedom. Copying popular American and European films of the era, the plot lines defined beauty, desire, and success according to Western ideals; Iranian traditions were either romanticized or ridiculed.

The character of Bella is based on Vida Ghahremani, a film star who made her mark as one of the leading ladies of Iranian cinema from 1955-65. She appeared in 17 Iranian films, all in 35mm, black & white, the industry standard in Iran at that time. Many of Vida's films were romances or melodramas, plus crime thrillers and comedies, dominated by female leads who outnumbered male film stars in this era. Redefining the Iranian woman was at the heart of the Pahlavi regime's social reform; the Shah's father had banned women from veiling in 1935. Cinema was central to promoting the image of the Westernized Iranian woman. So it came as no surprise when women's rights, specifically veiling, and cinema were targeted by Khomeini's regime when it toppled the Pahlavi reign in 1979.



### Select Vida Films:

- 1955**     **The Crossroad of Events**  
(Chahar-rahe havades) \*First kiss in Iranian cinema!  
Director: S. Khachikian
- 1960**     **Tomorrow Is Bright**  
(Farda rowshan ast)  
Director: S. Saker / Writer: N. Fatemi
- 1961**     **Fire and Ashes**  
(Atash va khakestar)  
Director & Writer: K. Parvisi
- 1961**     **The Midnight Terror**  
(Faryade nimeshab)  
Director & Writer: Samouel Khachikian

Poster for the film *Tomorrow Is Bright*, co-starring Vigen (Iran's King of Pop & Sultan of Jazz), Fardin (her leading man), and popular singer Delkash. Vida's character dons Western looks to re-attract her cheating husband.



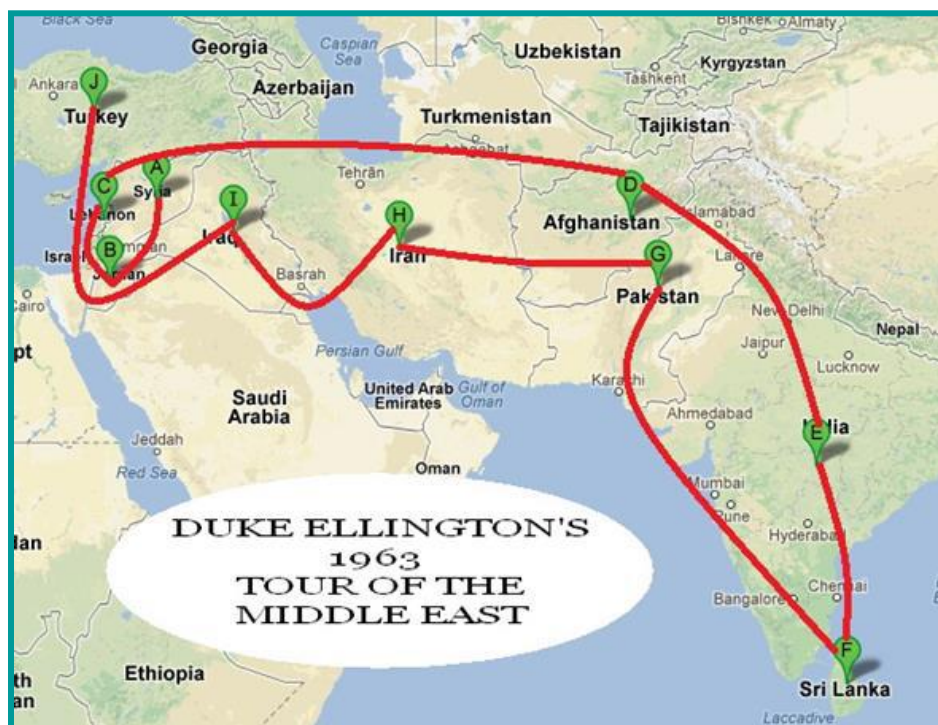
## America's Goodwill Ambassador



The Civil Rights movement reached its height in 1963 when Martin Luther King, Jr. led 250,000 at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28. On September 15, the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham – used as a meeting place by Civil Rights leaders – was bombed by reported members of the Ku Klux Klan, resulting in the death of four black girls aged 11 to 14. To counter the images of dissent broadcast around the world, the Kennedy Administration continued its U.S. State Department Tours, sending popular jazz musicians abroad as goodwill ambassadors. For the fall of 1963, the U.S. chose Duke Ellington. “Carefully designed to gain support for established foreign policy objectives relating to the particular country [visited],” the Duke Ellington Orchestra was sent on a three-month Tour to the Middle East and South East Asia.

Album Cover of Duke Ellington's *The Far East Suite*, RCA Victor, 1967.

The band encountered a changing Middle East that was negotiating Western notions of modernization. The character of Ray Hamilton is comprised of several Ellington musicians and their experiences on the tour. In Iran, the Ellington Orchestra performed in Tehran, Isfahan and Abadan, holding workshops at universities. Their concert in Tehran was broadcast live on Television Iran and lasted far longer than scheduled. In Iraq, the band arrived in the midst of a coup but despite city-wide curfews, “the Ellington concerts turned people away nightly.” Ellington made light of the political turmoil, “calling Baghdad a ‘swinging town’ and threatening to write a new composition called ‘Baghdad Bump or Boom or Bounce, or something like that.’” The tour was cut short in Turkey when President Kennedy was assassinated on Nov. 22. *The Far East Suite* album (1967), including the song “Isfahan,” arose from the sights and sounds the Ellington Orchestra absorbed during this trip.



(Quotations: *Ellington's America*, by Harvey G. Cohen, © 2010 U. of Chic. Press.)

Map of Duke Ellington's 1963 Tour of the Middle East. Image: Ehsan Khoshbakht Blog.

## Civil Rights Movement (A Few Key Moments)

### 1963

- May: During Civil Rights protests in Birmingham, Ala., Commissioner of Public Safety Eugene "Bull" Connor uses fire hoses and police dogs on black demonstrators. These images of brutality, which are televised and published widely, are instrumental in gaining sympathy for the Civil Rights Movement around the world.
- On August 28<sup>th</sup>, over a quarter of a million people participate in a march on Washington and hear Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., leader of the Civil Rights Movement, deliver his "I Have A Dream" speech.
- On September 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama is bombed, killing four African American girls (ages 11-14) attending Sunday school.
- On November 22<sup>nd</sup>, President Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas, Texas by Lee Harvey Oswald. Vice President Lyndon Johnson becomes President.

### 1964

- The Civil Rights Movement achieved two of its greatest successes: the ratification of the 24<sup>th</sup> Amendment on Jan 23<sup>rd</sup>, which abolished the poll tax (where you had to pay a fee before you could vote), and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, which prohibited racial discrimination in employment and education and outlawed racial segregation in public facilities.
- On October 14<sup>th</sup>, MLK wins the Nobel Peace Prize.

### 1965

- On Feb 21<sup>st</sup>, Malcolm X, African American Muslim leader is assassinated.
- On March 7<sup>th</sup>, Civil Rights protesters begin a march from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery led by MLK and the Southern Christian Leadership in support of voting rights but are stopped at the Pettus Bridge by a police blockade. Fifty marchers are hospitalized after police use tear gas, whips, and clubs against them. The incident is dubbed "Bloody Sunday" by the media. The march is considered the catalyst for pushing through the Voting Rights Act five months later.
- Aug 11-17: Race riots erupt in Watts, CA, a black section of Los Angeles.

### 1966

- NOW (National Organization of Women) is founded to fight politically for full equality between the sexes.
- The militant Black Panther Party is founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, CA.

### 1968

- On April 4<sup>th</sup>, MLK was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, by escaped white convict James Earl Ray.



Creative Team (L to R): Marcus Shelby, Laura Hope, L. Peter Callender, Vida Ghahremani, Torange Yeghiazarian, Nakissa Etemad



## Pre-Show Suggested Activities

- Delve deeper into any one of the four areas discussed in the background section of the play—Civil Rights Movement; Iranian Revolution; Duke Ellington’s Middle East Tour; Iranian Film. Have pairs of students choose a topic to present to the class.
- View the Iranian films on YouTube discussed in the play, as well as *Persepolis* film by Marjane Satrapi. (Some links provided below.)
- Listen to Jazz from the ‘60s, especially *The Far East Suite*.

## Post-Show Activities: Discussion

- 1) What did you know about Iran before seeing the play? What did you know about Jazz? What did you learn after seeing the play?
- 2) How is this play different from watching a Shakespearean play? In what ways is it similar?
- 3) How did the set, the costumes, the blocking (actor’s placement on stage) and visual and sound effects forward the play’s action and themes?
- 4) What is a revolution? How does it differ from a war? A rebellion? Do you think the Civil Rights Movement was a revolution? How are revolutions a positive force of change or a negative one?
- 5) How are the Iranians and African Americans the same? Different? How is identity formed? What factors contribute to a person’s identity? What forms a nation’s identity?
- 6) *Isfahan Blues* is filled with many layers of dualities that create tension and conflict: For example, in Scene 2-Road Trip, Bella says that “to live in Iran, you have to live a double-life; your private lifestyle is underground, the government’s lifestyle, above ground.” Ray also speaks of living a double life as an African American gay male in racist White America in the 1960s. What other dualities exist within the play? Do any of them resonate within your own life? Some examples might be: White/Black; Male/Female; Islamic Religious Culture/Secular Culture; and Violent/Non-Violent Revolutions.
- 7) Jazz is used in the play as a means of individual expression for the artists. It is also used as symbol of the ingenuity and goodwill of America, as represented by Duke Ellington and his group of musicians. How does the music in the play close the gaps between the Iranian and African American cultures? How does music both oppress and free Ray? How is Jazz music used as propaganda? What is the purpose of Jazz, or any style of music?
- 8) How are women treated in Iran before the 1979 Revolution? After? How are African American men treated in the U.S. before the Civil Rights Movement? After? What other groups in the play are displaced or embraced by revolutions?
- 9) In the play, Ray says the “ability to annihilate ourselves” is man’s greatest achievement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What is this exactly? Do you agree? Young Bella says Jazz is the greatest achievement. What do you think are man’s greatest achievements in the world today?
- 10) *Isfahan Blues* is both personal and political for the playwright and the actors. In this way, the play is both realistic and imagined at the same time. In what ways does the play inspire you to explore your own personal history?

## Resources for Further Exploration

- **African American Shakespeare Company**  
<http://www.african-americanshakes.org>
- **Golden Thread Productions Middle East Center Stage**  
<http://www.goldenthread.org>
- **Persepolis (a film) written and directed by Marjane Satrapi**
- **Lush Life: A Biography of Billy Strayhorn by David Hajdu (1997)**
- **Iranian blogger's timeline of Ellington tour to the Middle East**  
<http://ehsankhoshbakht.blogspot.com/2013/01/DukeIran.html>
- **Vida Ghahremani film: *Fire and Ashes* (1961)**  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ZvNpf4MZms>
- **Film Trailer for Vida Ghahremani film: *Tomorrow Is Bright* (1960)**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGneFMVyhNI>
- **Vida Ghahremani film: *The Midnight Terror* (1961)**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=10&v=MRsFyJnDprl>
- **Duke Ellington Orchestra plays Take the A Train (from the film Reveille with Beverly from 1943; the song was composed in 1939.)**  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cb2w2m1JmCY>
- **Duke Ellington interview, part 1 & 2 (1963)**  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmvaZqr6RFY>  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0jxd1n\\_wH0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0jxd1n_wH0)



Ticket to the Abadan, Iran Concert on the 1963 Ellington State Department Tour. Image: Ehsan Blog.

## Glossary of Persian Words

<b>AREH</b>	Yes.
<b>AYATOLLAH</b>	High-ranking cleric, expert in Islamic Studies.
<b>BANA-GOOSH</b>	Back of the ear, one of the meats in the dish Kaleh-Pacheh (see below).
<b>BEFARMAYIN</b>	Here you go.
<b>BEH SALAMATI</b>	To your health (a toast).
<b>CHADOR</b>	Traditional garment of Muslim and Hindu women, consisting of a long, usually black or drab-colored cloth or veil that envelops the body from head to foot.
<b>CHAKER</b>	Servant.
<b>CHELO KABAB/CHELO KABABI</b>	Persian cuisine of grilled meat (kabab) and rice (chelo)/Restaurant where you can eat kabab.
<b>GENDARME/GENDARMERIE</b>	The Military Police/Police Station, found in rural villages of Iran.
<b>GOOSALEH</b>	Derogatory term meaning “calf” or “donkey.”
<b>ISFAHAN-NESFE-JAHAN</b>	Isfahan is half the world.
<b>JAN/JOON</b>	Dear (terms of endearment), Jan is more formal.
<b>JEDDI</b>	Seriously.
<b>JIGAR</b>	Derogatory term implying delicious. Literally, liver.
<b>KAKA-SYAH</b>	Black slave.
<b>KALEH-PACHEH</b>	Persian meal of sheep’s head and knuckles.
<b>KHANOOM KHOSHGELEH</b>	Pretty lady.
<b>KOMAK</b>	Help (as in a cry for).
<b>LAVASH</b>	Flat bread made in a clay oven.
<b>MASJID</b>	Mosque.
<b>MAZEH</b>	Appetizer.
<b>MEYDOONEH NAGHSHEH JAHAN</b>	The main square in Isfahan, also spelled Naqsh-e Jahan.
<b>MULLAH</b>	A religious teacher or leader, usually Shiite.
<b>MURCHEH-KHORT</b>	Citadel in ruins outside Isfahan, a desert area in 1963.
<b>NAFAMIDAM YA’NI CHI</b>	“What is the meaning of this?”
<b>NOWRUZ</b>	Iranian New Year, on the first day of Spring.
<b>PAPASI</b>	A penny.
<b>SALAM</b>	Hello.
<b>SAVAK</b>	Secret Police of Iran from 1957-1979.
<b>TABAKHI-YEH SAVEH</b>	A café dedicated to making Kaleh-Pacheh, in the town of Saveh.