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Indiana
Repertory
Theatre

Tales from the Arabian Nights

November 11 through December 23, 1992

by Michael Bigelow Dixon, music by Jan Cole

Background

Imagine a foreign land a thousand years ago a land where men ride camels and women hide their faces behind veils. Imagine a land of mountains and deserts, sand and sun with roaming tribes of darkskinned traders. Imagine a land where caravans from Greece and Rome make their way east to the wonders of China and the Orient. Imagine a land of dazzling cities with crowded marketplaces and a whirl of activity. Imagine a land of exotic sights and smells where holy men call others to prayer from elaborate towers that dot the city. Imagine a land of mystery and magic where people believe in flying carpets, supernatural spirits and wondrous creatures.

If you can imagine such a fantastic realm, then you have some idea of the world of Scheherazade and *The Arabian Nights*.

Who was Scheherazade and what are the "Arabian Nights?" They are both a part of the folklore and literature of the Middle East. According to the legends of ancient Persia, Scheherazade was a princess who lived around 1000 A.D. and who was famous for her abilities as a storyteller. In fact, tradition has it that she kept the Sultan entertained for one thousand and one nights with her tales *Tales of the Arabian Nights*.

Did Scheherazade really exist? Probably not she was most likely an invention of a later storyteller who began to collect the tales that today make up the "Thousand and One Nights," or *The Arabian Nights*. Where then did the stories come from? Most likely from a variety of sources and countries. It is thought that the stories originated in countries throughout the Middle East and even the Oeiwnr lands that we know as Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Syria, India and China. These stories, with their use of magical beings and events, are the fairy tales of the area, serving to entertain and educate.

Though it is doubtful that Scheherazade existed, her Sultan did. His name was Haroun al Raschid and he ruled in Baghdad from 786 to 808 A.D. The sultan was a very powerful man, ruling over a huge empire. He was interested in poetry and learning and encouraged storytellers to make a home in his palace. Remember that this was a time before written books, so storytelling was a way of recording history as well as a form of entertainment. The sultan needed someone to record the accomplishments of his reign and to provide him with amusement.

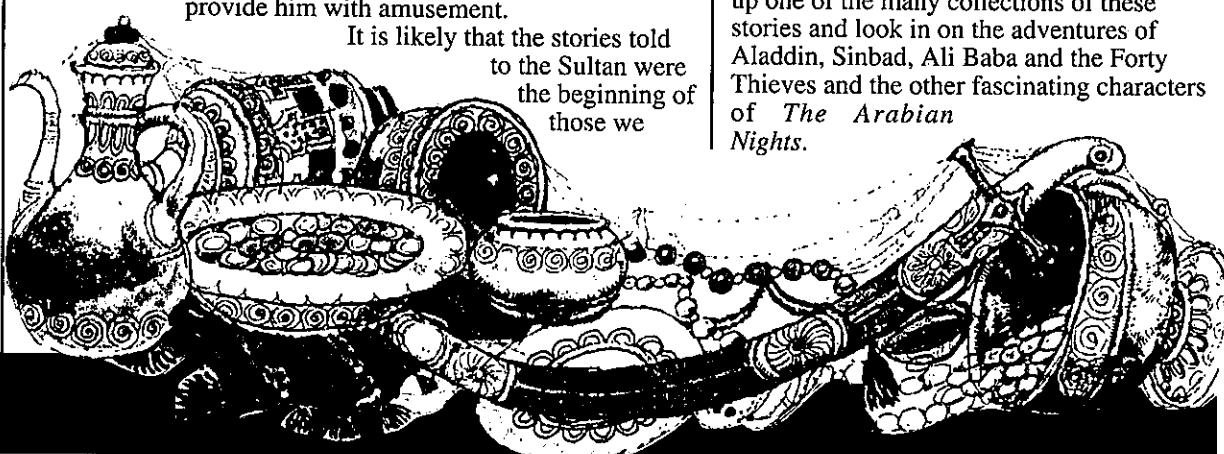
It is likely that the stories told to the Sultan were the beginning of those we

know as *The Arabian Nights*. No doubt his storytellers began to search the Middle East and the Orient for new and unusual stories, perhaps explaining why the tales have their origins in many different countries and times. Despite the variety within the tales, they outline the customs, manners, laws and values of the people.

The stories included in *The Arabian Nights* come under several categories: fairy tales like the stories of Aladdin and Ali Baba, romance stories like the story of Princess Ming, adventure stories such as Sindbad, humorous stories such as Khalifah the fisherman, and fables or parables (stories with a lesson) like The Snake Charmer and his Wife.

Every nation or culture has a type of literature that reflects the spirit of the people it represents. In our own country, we have the legends of Paul Bunyan, Daniel Boone and Johnny Appleseed as examples. France and Germany have a tradition of fairy tales - including Mother Goose's Tales and The Grimm Fairy Tales - which serve this purpose as well. We can see then, that *Tales of the Arabian Nights* represent a kind of magnificent record of life in the Middle East and the Orient a thousand years ago.

At some point, the character of Scheherazade was added to the reality of the Sultan and a framework for the tales was born. Of the over 600 tales Scheherazade is supposed to have told to her sultan, more than 250 have been recorded. They first came to the West in the early 1700s when they were collected and translated into French. English versions followed soon and *The Arabian Nights* have become a part of our literature as well as that of the East. In the IRT presentation, you will see only a few of the tales illustrated on stage, yet they will give you the flavor of ancient Persia and the Orient. We encourage you to pick up one of the many collections of these stories and look in on the adventures of Aladdin, Sinbad, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves and the other fascinating characters of *The Arabian Nights*.



An Arabian Primer

You are about to undertake a journey to one of the most fascinating places on earth, the Middle East. The land, peoples and customs of ancient Persia detailed in *The Arabian Nights* are far removed from our own, both in distance and manner. While the treatment of these exotic places will be fanciful in IRT's production, it will help you to know a little about the area and culture of the places referred to in *Tales from the Arabian Nights*.

When we talk about the land of *The Arabian Nights*, we are referring to the area known as ancient Arabia and Persia. This includes the bulk of the Arabian Peninsula or the area bounded by the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea and the Mediterranean. (See map.) This area includes the

countries known today as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt and Turkey. Ancient Persia encompassed lands to the north of the Persian Gulf and south of the Caspian Sea, including areas that are now in Iran, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan. Other *Arabian Nights* stories hail from as far as India and China to the east.

Because of differences in terrain and climate, life evolved somewhat differently in the north and south of this vast Middle Eastern region, which contains the area known as the "fertile crescent." Tribes of the north tended to be wandering, or nomadic, moving from place to place depending upon the availability of water and grazing land for cattle. In the south, communities were more established, giving rise to farming and trade. The area has long been important in relations between the East and the West. Caravans traveling to China often stopped in Arabia or Persia, making the region an important center for trade. In *Tales from the Arabian Nights*, we encounter characters who make their living as nomadic traders, merchants, fishermen and woodcutters.

Whether in northern Persia or the southern part of the Arabian peninsula, much of the region is united in religion. This is the great faith known as Islam. Islam, a word meaning "surrender or submission to God," is one of the major religions of the world, along with

Judaism and Christianity. Like the other two older religions, Islam preaches a belief in one God, the supreme being who created all, known as Allah. Islam was founded about the same time as the stories in *The Arabian Nights* were beginning to be told. Its founder and main prophet is Mahomet, who lived in the caravan city of Mecca around 600 A.D. His belief in one compassionate God marked a change from the religious practice of Arabia. At that time, there was belief in numerous idols and an emphasis on magic and charms as agents of the supernatural. Thus, Mahomet's ideas, including a belief in the Judgment Day, represented a break with tradition.

Despite this, Mahomet's ideas caught on quickly and Islam became practiced throughout the Middle East and into Europe and Asia by the time of *The Arabian Nights*. Part of the reason for this rapid popularity of the Islamic movement lies in the "jihad" or holy war, in which followers of Islam, called Muslims, spread the faith through conquest. Today Islam's influence is widespread, ranging from followers in Spain and northern Africa to parts of India and China. Wherever Islam is practiced, it has incorporated some of the culture and ideas of the native people, making it a complex and rich culture.

Islam has played a profound influence on the life and culture of the Middle East. Many of the stories in *The Arabian Nights* reflect this. There is frequent mention of Allah, the name for God in Islam; many actions of characters in the stories follow the tenants of the faith. Islam has also had an influence on areas of culture not directly related to religion. We find ideas based on Islam in art, crafts and architecture. The Middle East has become the home of magnificent architecture, miniature paintings of great subtlety, magnificent rugs, pottery and tilework, and a beautiful, flowing writing style that is one of the most sophisticated in the world.

Other influences have shaped the culture of the Middle East as well. Traffic to and from the area has been constant throughout history, whether for war or trade. Like the populations of most civilized nations, Persians are of mixed origins, including Iranians, Greeks, Arabs, Turks and others among their ancestors. This variety of cultures and ideas has produced a fascinating and unique culture which is quite different from our own blended culture of Euro-Americans, African-Americans and Latin-Americans. You might want to talk about some of the cultural differences you observe in the fascinating stories called *Tales from the Arabian Nights*.



The Land of the
Arabian Nights

About the Production

always magical fantasy. He wanted the look of it to span many cultures and many eras so that it would stimulate the imagination rather than mirror a particular time and place. And, to complicate matters more, the production, which has over 25 characters, was to be performed by only six actors playing multiple roles.

This was the challenge given to the scenic and costume designer, John Paoletti. To achieve this, he first did extensive historical research into the background of the times in which the play is set. Once he had a feel for the look of the architecture, life and clothing styles of the people of the Middle East, he developed a set that hinted at an Arabian setting. There will be mosques with onion domes on the backdrop, and upstage (the stage area furthest from the audience) there will be an open market (bazaar) such as there were and still are in Arabian countries. Downstage (the stage area closest to the audience) will become the many different settings needed for the tales. The colors selected intensify the fantasy and lightheartedness by their brightness and glitterpurple, bright red, gold, royal blue colors that give a sense of fun and wonder.

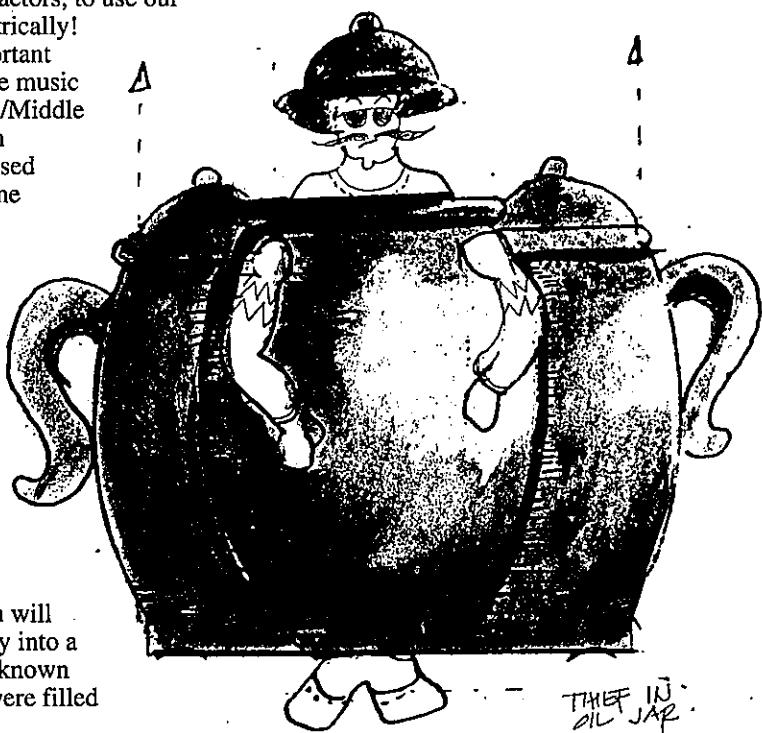
Lighting will be very important to the stories as it is used to move the action from place to place and to set the mood or time of each tale. Watch how light and shadow are used to suggest the presence of a genie rather than having an actor play the ethereal spirit.

The costumes will be in all the beautiful, bright colors of the set and will accent the fantasy and fun of the play. The costumes contain an idea called "anachronism" which means something that is out of its time period. High-top sneakers, sunglasses, baseball caps, and harem pants become the attire of the production, even though the ancient Persians didn't have any of these things. Using elements in this manner help us to realize that the stories we're seeing are both foreign and familiar.

But how do you make so many characters out of 6 actors, especially when two of them remain on stage as Scheherazade and the Sultan for most of the play? Watch the actors transform themselves, sometimes on stage in front of our eyes, from one character into another by changing costumes and altering their physical and vocal manner. One actor becomes "40 thieves" through the use of a costume that includes many dummies; another actor becomes the Snake in the snake charmer and his wife story. A puppet becomes a camel. The design elements of this production ask the audience, and the actors, to use our imaginations theatrically!

Another important element will be the music which has a Asian/Middle Eastern flavor. In theatre, music is used to help set the scene and enhance the action on the stage. Listen to the music and sound effects of the play and see how they influence your emotions and even your understandings of the action.

We look forward to your visit and hope you will enjoy your journey into a place and time unknown when the nights were filled with stories.



Thief in the Oil Jar by Costume and Scenic Designer John Paoletti

Tales from the Arabian Nights' director Peter Amster envisioned his production of this play to be a playful, sometimes scary,

A Note from the Playwright

As the twenty-first century approaches, *The Thousand and One Nights* remains a wonderbook of the mysterious East. Its many tales of marvels and enchantment, some of which have been retold for more than a millennium, originated in India, Iraq, Egypt, Turkey and possibly Greece. Their compilation into a single work was the achievement of many writers. Yet the survival of these fantasies, fables and historical anecdotes is due to the mastery of storytellers, who through the centuries have embroidered the tales with exotic details and imaginative descriptions.

The art of storytelling has inspired this adaptation of *Tales from the Arabian Nights*. This "contemporized" collection of familiar and obscure stories evokes an ancient world where magic and reality mingle, where sweet daydreams abruptly end in shivering awakenings. In this adaptation anything can happen, and indeed many strange things do. But it is all in the same spirit of creativity, fun and inventiveness that saved Scheherazade and entertained the Sultan for those thousand and one nights . . . a thousand and one years ago.

— Michael Bigelow Dixon

Stories included in *TALES FROM THE ARABIAN NIGHTS*

The Scheherazade story is set in *Samarkand, Persia*.
The other stories are set in:

Cairo: The Fisherman and the Bottle
Baghdad: Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves
Bombay: The Snake Charmer and His Wife
Ningpo and Oriental Oasis: Shukat and the Princess Ming

Words from *Tales from the Arabian Nights*

Allah: Islamic (Moslem) name for God
Sultan: leader of a Moslem country, particularly in ancient Turkey
Sultana: the Sultan's wife
Salaam: an ancient greeting of Oriental origins, usually accompanied by a low bow
Scimitar: a curved Oriental sword
Soothsayer: one who can foretell future events
Schism: a separation or division
Vizier: a high administrative official in a Moslem country
The Prophet Solomon: one of the Biblical kings of Judah-Israel reputed for wisdom; in Islamic folklore he was thought to have had a magic flying carpet and a magic ring; another tale tells of a jinn building Solomon's great temple. Solomon died at prayer while the temple was being built but God concealed Solomon's death from the jinn until the temple was completed.
Jinn: a Genie
Ashrafi coins: coin named for a Caliph El-Ashraf
Bazaar: an Oriental market
Vipers: small, poisonous snakes
Caliph El-Haroun: the name of a Persian ruler (Shahriar's real name?)
Dervishes: Moslem priests who dance wildly
Ningpo: town in China just south of Shanghai
Damascus: city in Syria
Oasis: a fertile spot in a desert, made green by a water source
Utopia: an ideal social and political system where all things are in harmony

Kalifa's Babies by Costume and Scenic Designer John Paoletti



Omar Set Piece by Costume and Scenic Designer John Paoletti

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