

PERFORM

'Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World': Covering the gentler side of the immigrant experience

By Chad Jones

Playwright Yussef El Guindi, best known for intensely political plays like "Back of the Throat" and "Language Rooms," never set out to write a romantic comedy. But that's what he delivers in "Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World," closing the season for Walnut Creek's Center Repertory Company.

"This play is a little more gentle and less confrontational," El Guindi says. "These characters, as opposed to those in some of my other plays, are not being menaced by political or societal forces. What tests them here are their own aspirations and yearnings for love and a better life."

The "pilgrims" in the title are Musa, an Egyptian immigrant, and Sheri, a Caucasian waitress, who find themselves navigating romance and cultural expectations.

El Guindi is himself an immigrant from Egypt. His family fled their native country in 1963 for England, and El Guindi returned to Egypt for college, where he graduated from the American University of Cairo in 1982 before heading to Carnegie Mellon University and a master of fine arts in playwriting.

From there he headed to San Francisco, where he worked with the Magic Theatre, Eureka Theatre and Lorraine Hansberry Theatre, among others. Since then he's taught at Duke University and established a home base in Seattle. El Guindi considers San Francisco a second home, and his work, including "Three Wolves and a Lamb" and "Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes," has popped up often in the past decade.

"San Francisco still has as vibrant and exciting a theater

If you go

Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World: Previews Thursday-Friday, opens Saturday. 8:15 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2:15 p.m. Sundays. Through May 12. \$20-\$35. Center Repertory Company at Knight Stage 3 Theatre, Leshner Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek. (925) 943-7469. www.centerrep.org.



Jasen Jeffrey

Carl Lumbly (left), Dorian Lockett, Rebecca Schweitzer, Gabriel Marin, Lena Hart in "Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World."



Center Repertory Company

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scene as it did when I first experienced the city back in the '80s," El Guindi says. "Outside of New York, there are only a handful of

cities that encourage such a vigorous, creative ferment. San Francisco is one of those cities."

El Guindi became an American citizen in 1996 and says the experience affected his creative life.

"Becoming a citizen crystallized for me the notion that I am an immigrant," he says. "I am now officially part of the story of this country."

"I belong to a long line of people who traveled here with ideas of starting something, daring something. I still remember walking out of the naturalization ceremony feeling surprised at how emotional and distinctively different I felt. I had gone in thinking it would be a dry, bureaucratic experience and came out feeling it had been a transformative one."

Chad Jones is a freelance writer.
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THEATER

The Acid Test: The Many Incarnations of Ram Dass Warren David Keith skillfully embodies spiritual seeker Ram Dass at phases, from Harvard LSD psychologist Richard Alpert through Hindu disciple to poststroke present. Through May 18. \$15-\$50. The Marsh, 1062 Valencia St., S.F. (415) 282-3055. www.the-marsh.org.

The Arsonists Mark Jackson directs Alistair Beaton's new translation of Max Frisch's eerie 1958 absurdist parable of middle-class helplessness in the face of evil. Through May 12. \$32-\$50. Aurora Theatre, 2081 Addison St., Berkeley. (510) 843-4822. www.auroratheatre.org.

Being Ernest Paul Gordon ("Emma") and composer Jay Gruska remake Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest" into a musical set in London's Carnaby Street in 1964. Ends Sun. \$23-\$73. TheatreWorks, Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro St., Mountain View. (650) 463-1960. www.theatreworks.org.

The Bereaved Crowded Fire Theater presents the wet coast premiere of Thomas Bradshaw's humorous take on sex, drugs and the American dream. Ends Sat. \$10-\$35. Thick House, 1695 18th St., S.F. (415) 746-9238. www.crowdedfire.org.

Big City Improv Improvised comedy. Ongoing. \$15. Shelton Theater, 533 Sutter St. (510) 595-5597. www.bigcityimprov.com.

The Bus James Lantz's story of two boys who rendezvous in a parked bus that belongs to the most powerful church in town. Ends Sun. \$25-\$45. New Conservatory Theatre Center, 25 Van Ness Ave., S.F. (415) 861-8972. www.nctcsf.org.

The Canterville Ghost Tim Kelly's adaptation of the Oscar Wilde story of a 1960s American family whose house is inhabited by a troublesome ghost. Ends Sun. New Conservatory Theatre Center, 25 Van Ness Ave., S.F. (415) 861-8972. www.nctcsf.org.

The Coast of Utopia: Shipwreck Shotgun Players presents the second installment of Tom Stoppard's trilogy based on prerevolutionary Russia. Through May 5. \$20-\$35. Ashby Stage, 1901 Ashby Ave., Berkeley. (510) 841-6500. www.shotgunplayers.org.

The Coast of Utopia: Voyage

Shotgun Players presents the first installment of Tom Stoppard's trilogy based on prerevolutionary Russia. Through May 4. \$20-\$35. Ashby Stage, 1901 Ashby Ave., Berkeley. (510) 841-6500. www.shotgunplayers.org.

Eurydice Sarah Ruhl reimagines the myth of Orpheus. Ends Sun. \$25-\$30. Custom Made Theater Company, 1620 Gough St., S.F. (415) 563-9938. www.custommade.org.

An Evening with "Mama" Cass Elliot Set weeks before her untimely death on July 29th, 1974, we join her as she rehearses her set for the Palladium concert with her accompanist. Fri.-May 4. \$25. The Garage, 715 Bryant St., S.F. www.facebook.com/crazycats-theatricals.

The Expulsion of Malcolm X Larry Americ Allen's fact-based drama about the relationship between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad. Through May 5. \$20-\$43. Gate House, Fort Mason, S.F. (510) 213-0401. <http://bit.ly/14TXgZr>.

Ghostbusters Adaptation of the '80s comedy film. Ends Sat. \$15-\$20. The Darkroom Theater, 2263 Mission St., S.F. (415) 401-7987. www.darkroomsf.com.

Grace and Glorie Tom Ziegler's story of a feisty illiterate 90-year-old who has checked herself out of the hospital and returned to her ramshackle cottage in the mountains of Virginia. Fri.-May 11. \$10-\$25. Diablo Actors Ensemble Theatre, 1345 Locust St., Walnut Creek. (866) 811-4111. www.diabloactors.com.

Guys and Dolls Berkeley Playhouse presents the classic Broadway oddball romantic musical comedy featuring "A Bushel and a Peck" "Luck Be a Lady" and "Adelaide's Lament." Ends Sun. \$17-\$60. Julia Morgan Theatre, 2640 Collage Ave., Berkeley. (510) 845-8542, Ext. 351. www.berkeleyplayhouse.org.

How to Make Your Bitterness Work for You Solo show by Fred Raker. Through May 5. \$15. Stage Werx Theatre, 446 Valencia St., S.F. www.brownpapertickets.com.

I'm Not OK, Cupid Left Coast Theatre presents new comedic, one-act LGBT-themed plays about relationships and dating in the millennium. Through May 4. Shelton Theatre, 533 Sutter St., S.F. www.leftcoasttheatreco.org.

Jersey Boys SHN presents the return of the national tour of the multi-award hit musical about Frankie Valli and the