Noura
Jan 11 – Feb 16
McGuire Proscenium Stage
No single play can represent the breadth of a cultural worldview, which is why we are sharing multiple stories that celebrate Arab artistry this season. Observing how human experiences intersect and diverge across cultures is one of the great virtues of theater, and I’m thrilled for our audiences to engage with powerful narratives from an array of Arab and Arab American artists.

Our mainstage production of Noura, a beautifully complex tale of identity and belonging by Iraqi American playwright Heather Raffo, sits in conversation with three Arab works in our Dowling Studio: Zafira and the Resistance by Kathryn Haddad (U.S.), Grey Rock by Amir Nizar Zuabi (Palestine) and Jogging by Hanane Hajj Ali (Lebanon). Producing and presenting these varied plays under one roof allows for an examination of Arab artistry in an environment that can entertain, inform and challenge us in profound ways.

I feel a great sense of urgency to share these works with our community, as our exposure to the Arab world is often limited or reduced to politically charged tales of war and extremism. In contrast, Noura, which is a response to Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, introduces us to a loving family of Iraqi immigrants who must navigate a maze of realities around citizenship, marriage, parenthood, cultural expectations and being caught between the past and present — all hallmarks of our shared humanity.

Heather Raffo wrote Noura as an attempt to bridge cultures and explore the internal conflict that occurs when we find our identity in multiple places that feel worlds apart. I’m grateful for her stunning script, this gifted company and our brilliant director Taibi Magar for telling this story with such poetry and poignancy while inspiring us to continue building bridges between one another.
Noura
by Heather Raffo

Creative Team

DIRECTOR
Taibi Magar

SCENIC DESIGNER
Matt Saunders

COSTUME DESIGNER
Dina El-Aziz

LIGHTING DESIGNER
Reza Behjat

SOUND DESIGNER/ORIGINAL MUSIC
Sinan Refik Zafar

RESIDENT DRAMATURG
Carla Steen

VOICE AND DIALECT COACH
Keely Wolter

RESIDENT FIGHT DIRECTOR
Aaron Preusse

RESIDENT CASTING DIRECTOR
Jennifer Liestman

STAGE MANAGER
Katie Hawkinson*

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER
Olivia Louise Tree Plath*

CULTURAL CONSULTANT
Shaymaa Hasan

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
Taous Claire Khazem

CASTING CONSULTANT
McCorkle Casting, Ltd.

DESIGN ASSISTANTS
Ryan Connealy (lighting)
Lisa Jones (costumes)
C Andrew Mayer (sound)

*Member of Actors’ Equity Association
+Alternate performances
Synopsis

“In letting go of the burden of silence — you open a door. Or maybe you close a door. Either way it’s a place from which you never return.”

– Noura to Rafa’a in Noura

Having fled their native Iraq years ago, Noura, her husband Tareq and their son Yazen live in New York City as newly minted U.S. citizens. Their passports now carry their Americanized names — Nora, Tim and Alex — but Noura is uncomfortable with the change. She’s restless on Christmas Eve yet looking forward to a modest gathering of family and friends for Christmas dinner. She finally gets to meet Maryam, an Iraqi orphan she’s sponsored, who is visiting during a break from her graduate studies at Stanford. Rounding out the guest list is Noura’s childhood friend Rafa’a.

When Maryam arrives ahead of schedule to drop off gifts, Noura is dismayed to discover that Maryam is pregnant — and unapologetic. Maryam planned the pregnancy and wants the baby because she’s never had a family of her own. Noura is shocked at Maryam’s brazenness and worries how Tareq will react. On Christmas, Noura must face past secrets, figure out how, or if, to move forward when she’s caught between two countries and determine what sacrifice is necessary to make movement possible.

SETTING

CHARACTERS
Noura, an architect originally from Mosul, Iraq. Now an immigrant living in New York City.
Tareq, her husband, originally from Baghdad. A former surgeon in Iraq. Now an emergency room hospitalist in New York City.
Rafa’a, Noura’s childhood neighbor from Mosul and a close family friend. An OB-GYN.
Yazen, Noura and Tareq’s very American son.
Maryam, a graduate student in physics studying at Stanford. Also originally from Mosul.
THE CREATIVE TEAM

Playwright Heather Raffo

“Through the lens of a family of Iraqi immigrants, Noura explores what it means to be an American. It’s a story about modern marriage and motherhood, and at its heart, it’s about how we balance the pull of rugged individualism with the call to purpose, community and belonging.”

Heather Raffo is an award-winning playwright and actor who was the solo writer and performer of the international and off-Broadway hit 9 Parts of Desire, which bridged her Iraqi and American roots and received countless awards and nominations, including the Lucille Lortel Award and Susan Smith Blackburn Special Commendation. She authored the libretto for the opera Fallujah, which was workshopped at The Kennedy Center’s International Theater Festival before premiering at Long Beach Opera and New York City Opera. The opera aired on PBS accompanied by the documentary Fallujah: Art, Healing and PTSD.

Her latest work, Noura, began at Shakespeare Theatre Company in 2018 and received a Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding Original New Play and an L. Arnold Weissberger New Play Award. The original production toured to the Abu Dhabi Arts Center before its New York premiere at Playwrights Horizons.

Originally from Michigan, Raffo received her B.A. in English from the University of Michigan and M.F.A. in Acting Performance from the University of San Diego. She has taught at dozens of universities and arts centers and performed globally at London’s House of Lords, the U.S.-Islamic World Forum and the Aspen Ideas Festival.

Director Taibi Magar

“Preparing to direct Noura has awakened in me a renewed and urgent perspective of our global humanitarian crisis, specifically around how hate and violence are erasing our cultures.”

Taibi Magar is an Egyptian American, Obie-winning director based in New York and a graduate of the Brown University/Trinity Rep M.F.A. program. She is committed to both classics and new work that wrestle with complicated humanistic and political questions evoked by potent characters and poetic language.

In New York, Magar has directed and developed work for Ars Nova (Underground Railroad Game, a New York Times and Tony Awards Critics’ Pick), The Foundry Theatre, Theatre for a New Audience and WP Theater. She is an alumnus of the Lincoln Center Theater Directors Lab and the recipient of a Stephen Sondheim Fellowship, Oregon Shakespeare Festival Fellowship, Public Theater Shakespeare Fellowship and Theatre for a New Audience Actors and Directors Project Fellowship.

Regionally, she has directed and developed work at Alley Theatre, Trinity Rep, Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival, Shakespeare & Company, Oregon Shakespeare Festival and many academic institutions, including The Juilliard School, Fordham University and New York University.
After the Door Slams: An Interview With Heather Raffo

By Johanna Buch
Writer and Publications Editor

The moment I asked playwright Heather Raffo my first question, snowflakes began falling gently outside, as if on cue. “Look at the snow being perfect!” she exclaimed. “It’s my play! It’s *Noura*!” In the script’s opening lines, Noura recalls a snowfall on a cold day in Mosul, her former home and a city that still has her heart. Raffo knows this feeling well as the daughter of an Iraqi immigrant, and she explores it with tenacity and depth in her latest play, *Noura*. We covered rich ground during our chat, but two things stood out: her passion for storytelling and her insatiable quest for truth.

**JOHANNA BUCH:** Here I am interviewing you, yet you are a seasoned interviewer! Your work, including *Noura*, is often born from years of research. Why are conversations a gateway into your writing?

**HEATHER RAFFO:** I never assume that I know what I *think* I know. Embedding myself in a community through deep conversation helps me uncover what is true and not just write what I might do in a given situation. As an actor, that’s where my muscle lies. When I’m preparing for a role, I study people and pick up on things. I do the same thing in my writing. It’s studied. It’s researched.

**JB:** Once you have a giant pile of notes, what comes next? How do you transform a multitude of conversations, people and stories into a single play?

**HR:** It can be overwhelming to have all that information sitting in your brain, but it eventually works its way out. Before I wrote *Noura*, I had been working with a group of Arab American women in Queens, New York, for four years without intending to write anything. When I realized how much of my own story intersected with theirs — motherhood, marriage, Mosul, feeling uprooted — I sat down to write, and the play flew out of me.
JB: How did the women feel about you sharing their stories through *Noura*? Was there an openness or did you receive pushback?

HR: There was more pushback with *9 Parts of Desire*, which was written and produced during a time when Middle Eastern people weren’t on stages, there wasn’t an Iraqi female protagonist in the English language and what I was saying was hugely taboo. But I’m always careful to composite stories and hide exposing details in my work. Here’s what I’ve learned over the years: Once people see what theater can do and how audiences respond, they want to talk to you. Any resistance or fear or secrets they may have held before are replaced by an urgent desire to tell their stories.

JB: How did you wind up reading Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* during your workshops in Queens?

HR: When Ron Russell, the founder of Epic Theatre Ensemble, suggested the idea to me, I realized that Americans love stories about the door slam. They’re incredibly satisfying. But they don’t like stories that explore what happens after the door slam. The women in my workshops were in their 20s, and they had fled or lived through atrocities that made *A Doll’s House* look trivial in comparison. Each of them had emigrated from their former country to America, and all they wanted to talk about was, “Then what?” That’s why the play was so interesting to discuss — not because I thought Middle Eastern women should know Ibsen. I’m tired of *A Doll’s House* being produced on stages all over the world to comment on modern feminism. What comes after Nora Helmer slams the door feels like a better space for feminist discussion.

JB: I hear you have some connections with the cast. Tell me what it’s like having familiar faces in the play.

HR: Fajer Kaisi, who plays Tareq, was in The Old Globe production of *Noura* last fall and some of the initial workshops. As a fellow Iraqi American actor, I can artistically confide in Fajer in the most profound of ways. I also worked with Gamze Ceylan, who plays Noura, when I was leading the workshops in Queens. The women had written scenes in response to *A Doll’s House*, and Gamze was our lead actor, so she was already inside the process of *Noura*. She loved these women and they loved her. It was powerful for everyone.

JB: You’ve played the role of *Noura* in several productions. How does it feel watching another actor embody her?

HR: It’s great because I get to see the play from a distance. The rehearsal process is faster when I act what I’ve written, but things slow down in tech or previews because I can’t sit in the house and see what needs to be done. I enjoy watching different productions and considering them from the outside. Seeing how the play lands with different communities and listening to the zeitgeist of their conversations is fascinating.

JB: Food is a focal point in *Noura* like it is in many families, especially during the holidays. Why was it important to bring food to the forefront?

HR: A holiday meal is Noura’s way of getting everyone she loves in the same place at the same time. She isn’t a great cook, but she’s a great architect. So the meal isn’t about making the food — it’s about designing the moment.

JB: I love how we see Noura’s architectural mind at work during the play, but you can also see her struggling to believe that her dreams and visions will be realized.

HR: Individualism isn’t common in Middle Eastern cultures, so if you’re a visionary like Noura and your capabilities are suppressed, it’s extremely painful. When you visit a building like the Guthrie, you realize that architecture moves in a certain way. If they hadn’t done this or that, things would look and move differently. Noura’s brain...
is wired to think like that. Every Day. She can’t stop. The late Zaha Hadid, an Iraqi who is arguably the greatest architect in the world, was my constant touchstone for Noura. Zaha didn’t have kids or over-worry about Iraq. To attain her dreams, she had to be a rugged individualist with a Western mindset and focus on nothing but her career. If you are like Noura — worried about your country, community, kids and family — how do you carry those worries while also being a visionary and implementing your vision?

**JB:** The East-West contrast between individualism and community seems to be the crux of the play. Why set this conflict within a family?

**HR:** That’s where I feel the most pressure personally. My career had to take a big hit in order to have kids. I was willing to do it, but I often wondered why it had to be that way. I have great husband, so it wasn’t about that. It’s just the way things are structured. My dad came to the U.S. in the 1960s, and he was the only one of nine brothers and sisters to leave Iraq. He said he was just going for college, but then he met my mom, married her and stayed. And he is so happy, as though America is exactly where he needed to be. Yet none of his siblings wanted any part of that. Everyone has a different threshold for when — or if — they’re going to leave a place, community or situation, whether it’s by choice or when circumstances are dire. In Noura, that threshold plays out differently for each character.

**JB:** At first rehearsal, Artistic Director Joseph Haj commented that many Americans have a limited view of the Arab world. How might Noura expand or redefine these perceptions?

**HR:** I think Noura redefines who we’re comfortable thinking of as refugees. The play shows a family of progressive intellectuals with a mother who is a visionary architect. A family like this makes people very uncomfortable, even though you’d think the opposite. The national narrative around migrants and refugees is polarized into either victim or enemy. So portraying a family that doesn’t sit in either camp is challenging for everybody.

**JB:** Your illumination of the refugee narrative has resonated with audiences and critics alike, as evidenced by Noura winning the Charles MacArthur Award for Outstanding New Play. Congrats!

**HR:** Believe it or not, I got the news when I was at home doing dishes. [laughs] It felt like such a gift in that moment!

**JB:** I’d love to see a photo of you holding the award with soapy dishwashing gloves.

**HR:** Yes, let’s make that happen!

**JB:** In all seriousness, why do you think Noura hits so close to home?

**HR:** I think belonging is something every human being considers. It’s always vibrating within us, and I think we will forever long for belonging and question what it looks like. The idea that Iraq is a bellwether for America is very unsettling, but Noura poses that. Across all communities, there is a woven fabric of thousands of years of history that is more than the sum of any past wars or discriminations. But that fabric is being torn apart in a manmade, purposeful way. Consider the Iraqi family in Noura: There’s nothing but love on that stage, but by the end of the play, everyone might walk out. If this is happening in a loving family, what is going on with us? We can’t undo the past, but we can examine why things are the way they are and try to build toward a better future.

**JB:** One of my graduate professors said that the best endings have both a sense of closure and a sense of beginning. Will audiences experience this after seeing Noura?

**HR:** If there is an ending, it’s that life as Noura knew it has ended. All her secrets are out in the open and that’s good. If there is a beginning, it’s that Noura is asking the same question the women in Queens were asking: “Then what?” She knows the answer will require some kind of sacrifice. She clearly loves her friends and family, but she’s intrigued by what she might find if she walks away. Either way, it’s Noura’s move.
Meet Cultural Consultant
Shaymaa Hasan

DAISUKE KAWACHI: Tell me about being the cultural consultant for Noura. What is your role in the rehearsal room?

SHAYMAA HASAN: They ask me about everything related to my Iraqi culture, so things like how we cook and serve food or what we put in tea to change the flavor. As an immigrant myself, I get asked how it feels to live in a different country with a different culture.

DK: Not everyone who sees Noura will be familiar with Iraqi culture. Why is it important to make this production as culturally specific as possible?

SH: Because Iraqi culture is a unique culture. Yes, we are considered Arab, but Iraqi culture is different. For example, if I want to talk about food, because a big part of the play is food, we have so many specific foods. We’re famous for dolma [stuffed vegetables], kubba mosul [meat pies] and samak masgouf [slow-cooked fish]. Also, this play is about events that happened in Iraq, so everybody needs to share our culture.

DK: A major part of the play is about what each character brought with them and left behind. What did you bring and leave behind when you came to the U.S.?

SH: I brought some of my books, things that are close to my heart and the necessities. What I left behind? I left my family. Friends. Neighbors, my neighborhood. And all the good memories.

DK: What does it mean for you to be an immigrant here, living in a different culture?

SH: I told the cast about when I was homesick; one day I stopped breathing for no reason. I felt sadness. I missed my family. I left a lot of things in my country, but the most important thing I left is my family.

DK: How has being part of the Noura creative team impacted you?

SH: The first day, when I saw the set, I cried. And when they talked about my culture, I cried. It’s so very hard because when I came to the U.S. in 2013, I had never left my country, and now I cannot leave the U.S. I miss my family so much. I have nephews. And they have grown up and they have children now! I miss everything over there. It’s so hard to talk about your memories and your country. But I like this play. I’m very excited to see it. I’m telling every Iraqi I know that they have to come see it.
In Conversation: Celebrating Arab Artistry
Sunday, January 26 at 3:30 p.m.

Join us for a dynamic discussion that will explore what it means to create theater through an Arab lens in the U.S. and beyond. Moderated by Taous Claire Khazem, assistant director for Noura, the conversation will feature a diverse group of Arab theatermakers and artists in our current season.

Reserve free tickets at 612.377.2224 or guthrietheater.org.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SAINT PAUL PUBLIC LIBRARY

A Noura-Inspired Reading List
From Iraqi cookbooks and immigration stories to Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House, there’s so much to explore before and after you see Noura. This SPPL-curated list will immerse you in the themes of Heather Raffo’s thought-provoking new play.

EXPLORE RESOURCES

For more staff-recommended book lists on a variety of topics, visit www.sppl.org.