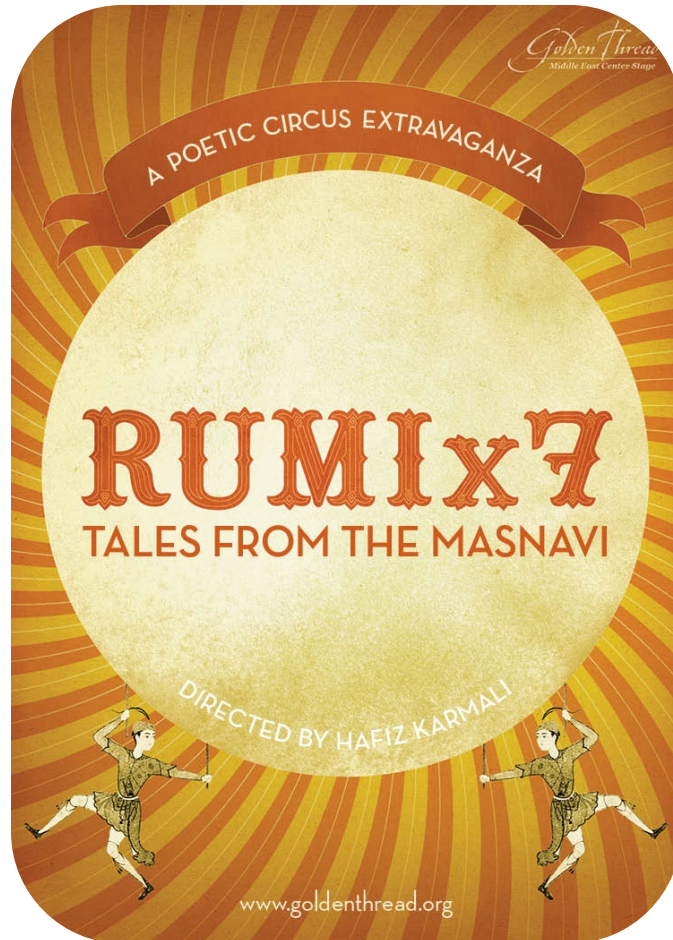


# Rumi X 7 = Tales from the Masnavi

A Study Guide



*“Listen to the song of the reed,  
How it wails with the pain of separation:*

*Ever since I was taken from my reed bed  
My woeful song has caused men and women to weep.*

*I seek out those whose hearts are torn by separation  
For only they understand the pain of this longing.*

*Whoever is taken away from his homeland  
Yearns for the day he will return.”*

## **Table of Contents**

---

**Table of Contents** 2

**About the Play** 3

**About the Director** 3

**Synopsis of Scenes** 4

The Shopkeeper and the Parrot

The Thief and the Gardener

The Mouse and the Camel

The Elephant in the Dark

The Scholar and the Boatman

Solomon and the Angel of Death

Moses and the Shepard

Rumi's Funeral

**Performance Styles** 5

**About Whirling Dervishes**

**Map of Middle East? – Rumi lived in following countries?**

**Activities**

**Discussion Questions**

**Resource Guide** 1

**About the Director**

**About Golden Thread Productions**

**RUMI x 7 = TALES FROM THE MASNAVI, translated by A.J. Arberry.**

### **ABOUT THE PLAY**

**RUMI x 7 = TALES FROM THE MASNAVI** is the first play in a new series, **ISLAM 101**, designed to educate the public about Islam through theatre. Through seven vignettes that fuse classical Persian poetry with a dazzling panorama of circus arts and commedia dell arte, Rumi's timeless tales explore the ties that bind human kind to the natural world, to their dreams and to their infinite potential.

**RUMI'S MASNAVI** is widely recognized as one of the greatest collections of Sufi poetry ever written and is revered throughout the Middle East and around the world as the Qur'an in Persian. The thirteenth-century Sufi poet Jalal al-din Rumi composed this edifying work for the benefit of his students in the order named after him, popularly known as the whirling dervishes. In order to convey his message of divine love and unity he threaded together entertaining stories and allegorical homilies. Drawing from folk tales as well as sacred history, Rumi's poetry is often comic as well as spiritually profound. The *Masnavi* was composed during the final years of Rumi's life. He began dictating the first book around the age of 54 circa 1258 and continued composing verses until his death in 1273. The sixth and final book would remain incomplete.



Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi: *Masnavi* (Mansuri), Iran, 1479

### **ABOUT THE DIRECTOR**

**Hafiz Karmali** has a special interest in cross-cultural performances with a view to showcasing indigenous performing arts of the Islamic world. To this end, he has directed *Azaan- A Court Entertainment* in collaboration with performers from Ismaili communities in London and Tajikistan (Guest of Honor: His Highness the Aga Khan); *Rumi x 7 = Tales from the Masnavi* in Uzbekistan; *Water for Life*, in collaboration with a dance company from Gujarat; and with folk artists of Karimabad, Hunza, *Legend of the Baltit Fort*. Hafiz most recently directed the highly acclaimed world premiere of *Night Over Erzinga* by Adriana Sevahn Nichols with Golden Thread Productions in San Francisco. Hafiz is finalizing his doctorate thesis on classical Ismaili philosophy.

## **SYNOPSIS OF SCENES**

### **THE SHOPKEEPER AND THE PARROT**

A parrot who is kept captive in a golden cage by his shopkeeper so that he can attract customers by his beautiful singing, requests that the merchant give a message to the friends of his youth, whom he had flown freely with in the forest. Upon return, the shopkeeper describes what happened when the free birds hear of their friend's captivity. The bird imitates his friends' actions and gains his own freedom, deceiving his captor whom does not understand his desire for freedom.

### **THE THIEF AND THE GARDENER**

A thief who has climbed into an orchard to steal fruit, claims that he is destined by God's will to be a thief and therefore not responsible for his illegal activity. The gardener convinces him to descend from the tree and then proceeds to beat him, claiming that it is God's will that he beat the thief. The thief realizes his mistake and acknowledges that a man sins by his own free will.

### **THE MOUSE AND THE CAMEL**

A mouse mistakes his powers when he 'leads' a camel by its rope to the edge of a river. The camel sets him straight by explaining that the mouse cannot cross the shallow river, while the camel can. The camel takes the mouse across on his hump while advising the mouse to stick to associating with his own kind.

### **THE ELEPHANT IN THE DARK**

Some Hindus had brought an elephant for exhibition and placed it in a dark place where visitors could not see the whole animal but were allowed to touch it. Each visitor has a different idea of what the animal must look like based on what part they touch. None are able to correctly describe the whole animal, but each thinks he must have the correct answer.

### **THE SCHOLAR AND THE BOATMAN**

A scholar, who prides himself on his education, dismisses the life of the boatman carrying him across a stream since the boatman is uneducated. The boatman points out that the scholar's inability to swim when the boat is caught up in a whirlpool renders the scholar's learning ineffectual.

### **SOLOMON AND THE ANGEL OF DEATH**

A nobleman asks King Solomon's help in escaping the angel of death by commanding the wind to carry him to another country. The next day, Solomon learns that the angel had been instructed by God to take the nobleman's spirit in that same distant country, rendering the man's flight useless.

### **MOSES AND THE SHEPHERD**

Moses rebukes a shepherd for praying to God in a way that the prophet believes is incorrect. A voice from heaven, presumably God's, chides Moses, telling him that He is not concerned with how men show him devotion, only that they do so with a true heart.

### **RUMI'S FUNERAL POEM**

On the day I die, as my casket is being carried away,  
don't think it pains me to leave this world.

Don't weep for me; don't wail. Alas!  
Don't fall into the devil's snare, that would be sad indeed.

## **PERFORMANCE STYLES** there are many performance styles throughout *RUMIX 7*

**MIME**, or performance without speech, is a very old tradition often found in many cultures. **CIRCUS** clowns are the most familiar manifestation of this tradition, with their white-face make-up and extravagant costumes. The famous French mime, Marcel Marceau, created unforgettable characters whose slightest movement could inform an entire tragic or comic scene with pathos or hilarity. As in *Commedia*, clowns and mimes rely on stock characters caught up in predictable dilemmas and will often utilize exaggerated physical comedy to evoke laughter from their audiences.

**COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE**, the most notable of performance styles in the production, originated in Italy in the 16th century and was performed by traveling troupes of professional players (*comici*). The comic plays featured stock characters whose exploits followed predictable patterns (not unlike contemporary sitcoms) and were enlivened by music, dance, witty wordplay and physical comedy. Staging was minimal - portable props and costumes established the scene.

Similar to *Commedia* in Italy, Middle Eastern storytelling traditions involve stock characters as well, and local audiences would recognize such figures as the Shopkeeper, the Thief, and the Scholar immediately. Tales of these characters are found in stories from all around the region.

**TRADITIONAL STORYTELLING** continues to be an important popular performance style in the Middle East, particularly in Egypt and the Levant. In many old traditions storytelling is synonymous with song, chant, music, or epic poetry. Stories may be chanted or sung, along with musical accompaniment on a particular instrument. The storytellers and musicians often functioned as historians, healers, and tradition-bearers.

There are various storytelling traditions found throughout the Middle East, for example:

“Hekawati,” an Arab tradition of oral storytelling, narrates adventurous legends, fables and tales of kings and warriors. This narrative style darts in and out of stories like an intricate and complex weaving pattern where the storyteller begins one tale, leaves it mid-way to pick up another and then has a third story emerging from a subplot of the first and so on. All this is done using the tools of allegory, folklore, satire, music and a visual spectacle of grand gestures and facial expressions to finally create an enthralling experience for listeners.

“Mareke girl” is a kind of public traditional street performance in Iran, often featuring such feats by the performer as breaking chains with arms, breaking stones and playing with snakes.

“Naghali” is narrated story done in prose with special tones, feelings and expression. A “naghali” (storyteller), solely plays the roles of different characters and usually narrates epics and mythical stories in coffee houses.

“Dastans” are epic singers from northern Khorasan, (east of Iran,) who narrate and sing stories in Turkish accompanying themselves on the “dotar” (long-necked two-stringed lute), and also sing in Kurdish about the historical deeds of local figures.

The “Bakhshi” are singers who use a fiddle or lute as accompaniment, and perform tales that may run through several nights of exhaustive performance. They are akin to shamans, as they use the reciting of these tales as a conduit to the Spirit world.

In Turkey, a very old folk tradition that thrives to this day is “ozan,” the music of the folk-poets of Anatolia, who are usually referred to as “ashiks,” meaning 'the ones in love' [with the Divine]. The “ashiks” put music to the words of legendary poets and accompany themselves on the “saz,” a long-necked lute, with three sets of strings, said to represent the fundamental trinity of the Muslim faith: Allah, Mohammed and Ali.

## ABOUT WHIRLING DERVISHES



Many people who have heard about Rumi associate him with the sect of Sufi Islam called the Whirling Dervishes. Inspired by his recollection of his beloved teacher, Rumi originated the practice of dancing in circles while praying and reciting poetry. Rumi believed passionately in the use of music, poetry and dance as a path for reaching God. For Rumi, music helped devotees to focus their whole being on the divine and to do this so intensely that the soul was both destroyed and resurrected. It was from these ideas that the practice of Whirling Dervishes developed into a ritual form.

"When whirling dervishes turn in circles, they are in a state of prayer... They turn in a way that will make the Light of God descend to the earth. They believe that divine light comes through the right hand when it's turned upward. The left hand brings the light down into the world." The dervishes wear black robes, which they "throw off...as if they are releasing the things on earth that keep them from God. Underneath their cloaks are dazzling white gowns which stand for divine light." (Demi, 30)

Other religious traditions similarly involve a physical response to deep spiritual engagement. Some include Shakers, Quakers, Christian sects that include snake handling, gospel singing and praise worship in their service, Jewish davening, African and Native American religious dance, and the Hawaiian hula.

## ABOUT THE POET, MOWLANA JALALUDDIN RUMI



Rumi was a 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian Muslim poet, theologian and Sufi mystic, and is considered one of the greatest poets and spiritual masters of all time. He was the founder of the Mawlawi Sufi order, a leading mystical brotherhood of Islam, and his *Masnavi* is considered one of the greatest literary glories of Persia. His poems have been widely translated into many of the world's languages and their importance is considered to go beyond national and ethnic borders.

Rumi was born in 1207 in Balkh, a historical province that is now part of modern Afghanistan, to a family of learned theologians. Escaping the Mongol invasion, Rumi and his family traveled extensively throughout the Middle East, performed pilgrimage to Mecca and finally settled in Konya, Turkey.

When his father Bahaduddin Valad passed away, Rumi inherited his position as the Islamic molvi. At 24 years old, Rumi was an accomplished scholar in religious sciences. For nine years, Rumi practiced Sufism, and then he became a public figure serving as an Islamic teacher and giving sermons in the mosques of Konya.

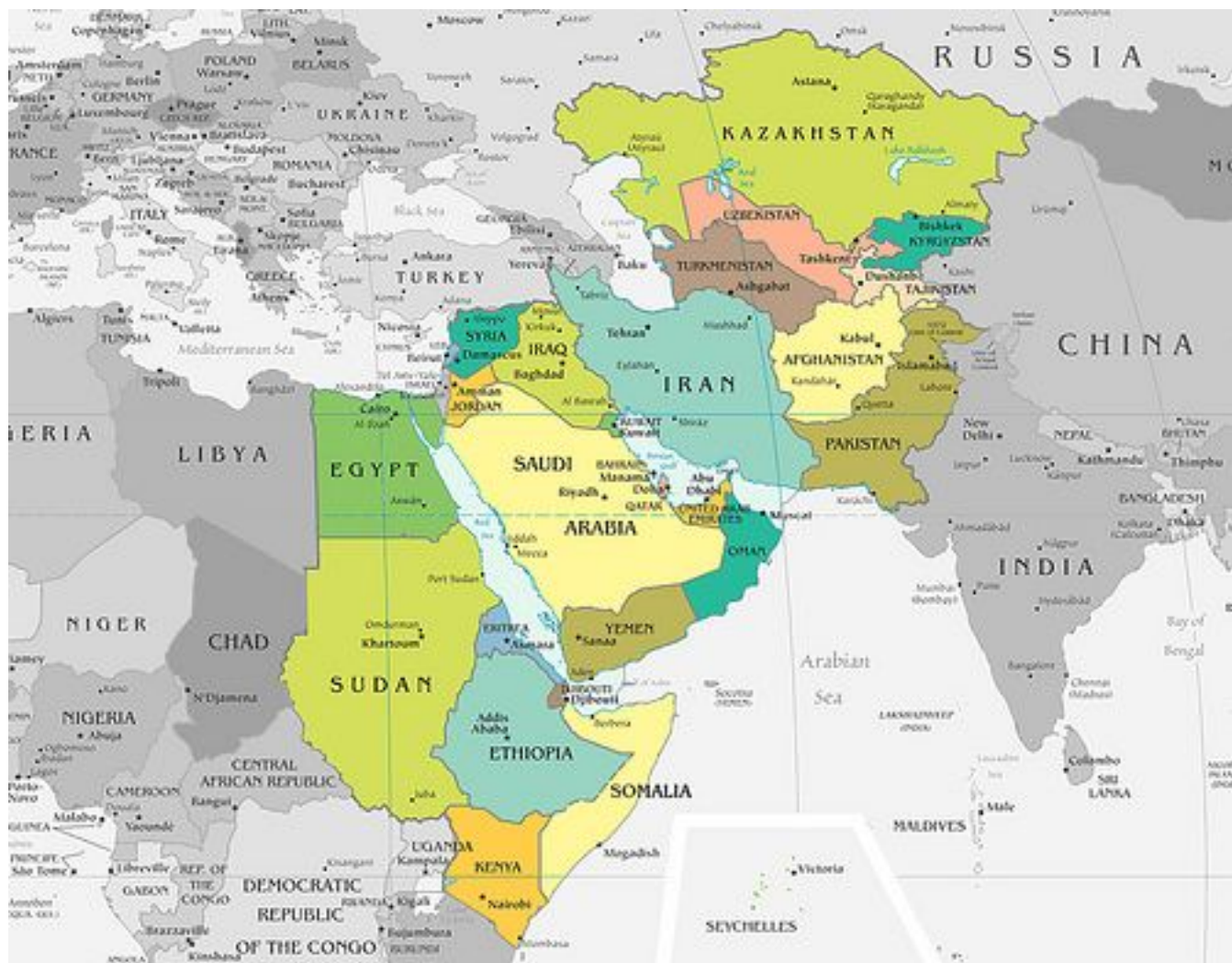
In 1244, he met and practiced with the dervis, Shams-e Tabrizi, who changed his life. From an accomplished teacher and jurist, Rumi transformed into an ascetic. Shams mysteriously died, and in mourning his death, Rumi began writing lyric poems. It is then that Rumi spent the next twelve years of his life in Anatolia dictating the six volumes of this masterwork, the *Masnavi*.



The *Masnavi* weaves fables, scenes from everyday life, Qur'anic revelations and metaphysics into a vast and intricate tapestry. The general theme throughout (similar to other mystic and Sufi poets of Persian literature), is the concept of “tawhid”- union with his beloved from which/whom he has been cut off and become aloof — and his longing and desire to restore it.

Following his death, in December 1273, his followers and his son founded the Mevlevi Order, also known as the Order of the Whirling Dervishes, famous for its Sufi dance. Each year the Mawlawi Dervishes host a festival in Konya marking the anniversary of Rumi’s death.

## MAP OF THE MIDDLE EAST



## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

### FOLLOW UP ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION

*Discussion Questions after the performance:*

1. What are some of the themes Rumi speaks about in his poems? What does this tell you about Rumi's beliefs/ worldview? What does the poem spoken at Rumi's funeral tell you about Rumi's beliefs about the afterlife?
2. How has 'seeing' poetry differed from reading it? What surprised you?
3. Have you ever heard about the Whirling Dervishes, the Sufi mystical dancers who spin around as they pray? When you watched the spinning, did it remind you of any other religions who share attributes to this practice of moving for devotion?
4. What role, if any, does playfulness have in Rumi's poetry? Has this performance changed your thinking about Islam or about any of the themes presented?

*Class Activity:*

Have your class read Rumi's poem, "Song of the Reed." This poem opens the *Masnavi*.

*Listen to the song of the reed,  
How it wails with the pain of separation:*

*Ever since I was taken from my reed bed  
My woeful song has caused men and women to weep.  
I seek out those whose hearts are torn by separation  
For only they understand the pain of this longing.  
Whoever is taken away from his homeland  
Yearns for the day he will return.  
In every gathering, among those who are happy or sad,  
I cry with the same lament.  
Everyone hears according to his own understanding,  
None has searched for the secrets within me.  
My secret is found in my lament  
But an eye or ear without light cannot know it..*

*The sound of the reed comes from fire, not wind  
What use is one's life without this fire?  
It is the fire of love that brings music to the reed.  
It is the ferment of love that gives taste to the wine.  
The song of the reed soothes the pain of lost love.  
Its melody sweeps the veils from the heart.  
Can there be a poison so bitter or a sugar so sweet  
As the song of the reed?  
To hear the song of the reed  
everything you have ever known must be left behind.*

*Discussion Questions:*

1. Imagery uses language to create sensations—write down the images that stick with you, as you read this poem. What pictures were created in the story? What sounds do you remember? How did it make you feel?



2. In this poem, Rumi talks about separation from his homeland. Have you ever been far away from your home before or felt such separation? What made you feel better?
3. The reed or 'ney' is a popular Middle Eastern musical instrument, which traditionally connotes melancholy and sadness when it is used. Can you think of other specific instruments- what feelings do they induce for you?

*Class Activity:*

Have your class read Rumi's story, "Elephant in the Darkness"

*Some Hindus have an elephant to show.  
No one here has ever seen an elephant.  
They bring it at night to a dark room.*

*One by one, we go in the dark and come out  
saying how we experience the animal.  
One of us happens to touch the trunk.  
A water-pipe kind of creature.*

*Another, the ear. A very strong, always moving  
back and forth, fan-animal. Another, the leg.  
I find it still, like a column on a temple.*

*Another touches the curved back.  
A leathery throne. Another the cleverest,  
feels the tusk. A rounded sword made of porcelain.  
He is proud of his description.*

*Each of us touches one place  
and understands the whole that way.  
The palm and the fingers feeling in the dark  
are how the senses explore the reality of the elephant.*

*If each of us held a candle there,  
and if we went in together, we could see it.*

*Discussion Questions:*

1. Middle Eastern storytellers often communicate in symbols. How does Rumi use an animal (in the case an elephant) to talk about his worldview? What does the elephant symbolize?
2. What is the difference between "seeing" with the hands vs "seeing" with the eyes?
3. What difficulties arise when knowledge about a subject is incomplete or when incorrect conclusions are drawn that lead to conflict? How might this 'fragmented knowledge' be similar to the way we understand the Middle East? Different religions? Different political views? Where have you seen this occur?

*Class Activity:*

We can use animals to get us out of our 'human world' and still write about something meaningful in our lives. Using an elephant or a favorite animal, and write a short allegorical story that ends with a moral.

## TEACHER RESOURCES

### BOOKS

Demi. *Rumi: Whirling Dervish*. Marshall Cavendish Children, Tarrytown NY, 2009. (Written for upper elementary and middle school children)

Friedlander, Shems. *Rumi and the Whirling Dervishes*. Morning Light Press, 2003. (Extensive bibliography and glossary)

Gamard, Ibrahim, trans. *Rumi and Islam: Selections from His Stories, Poems, and Discourses*. Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2004.

### FILMS

*Rumi: Poet of the Heart*. DVD. Narrated by Debra Winger. Magnolia Films, 2004.

*Rumi: Turning Ecstatic*. DVD. Choices Studio. 2007

*Islamic Mysticism: The Sufi Way*. DVD. Hartley Film Foundation, 2009.

### WEB SITES

[www.dar-al-masnavi.org](http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org) - full text of Masnavi; background materials

[www.rumiforum.org](http://www.rumiforum.org) - interfaith initiatives, peace-building

[www.rumionfire.com](http://www.rumionfire.com) - variety of translations, poems, images

## **ABOUT GOLDEN THREAD PRODUCTIONS**

### **Golden Thread Productions**

Founded in 1996, Golden Thread Productions is dedicated to exploring Middle Eastern cultures and identities as expressed around the globe. We present alternative perspectives of the Middle East by developing and producing theatrical work that is aesthetically varied and politically and viscerally engaging, while supporting countless Middle Eastern artists in all phases of their careers. Our mission is to make the Middle East a potent presence on the American stage and also to make theatre a treasured cultural experience within Middle Eastern communities. We build cultural bridges by engaging the community in an active dialogue and facilitating collaborations among artists of diverse backgrounds with the aim of creating a world where the common human experience supersedes cultural and political differences.

### **Education at Golden Thread Productions**

By providing theatre education rooted in Middle Eastern arts and literature, Golden Thread's Education Program addresses the parallel needs of Middle Eastern youth and families for self-affirming performing arts programming as well as the broad community's need for a deeper understanding of the richness of Middle Eastern arts. Additionally, the program equips arts educators with much needed overview of the region and its culture. Golden Thread's multifaceted Education Program has the following main elements:

**Theatre Curriculum inspired by Middle Eastern Arts & Literature:** An innovative theatre education curriculum rooted in Middle Eastern arts and literature with training programs for teaching artists focused on Middle Eastern history, arts and literature taught by university professors and master artists.

**Teaching Residencies:** Theatre classes and workshops that use both traditional and contemporary Middle Eastern literature and the arts as resource to lead classes in performance skills and writing at host schools and cultural organizations. Class content and activities is informed by the teachers' own diverse immigrant background and facilitated by multi-lingual skills.

**The Fairytale Players:** Inspired by popular performance traditions in the Middle East the Fairytale Players employ epic story-telling, physical theatre and circus arts techniques in creating performances based on stories from the Middle East.

**Student Matinee Performances of Main Stage Productions:** To enrich students' understanding of main stage productions, Golden Thread offers special matinee performances supported by study guides that connect various aspects of the play to elements of California Education Standards. Study guides contain detailed information about each play, giving historical, cultural, geographical background, as well as pre- and post-show activities to deepen the audience's understanding of the play.

For more information on partnering with our Education Programs, please email [education@goldenthread.org](mailto:education@goldenthread.org).

[www.goldenthread.org](http://www.goldenthread.org)