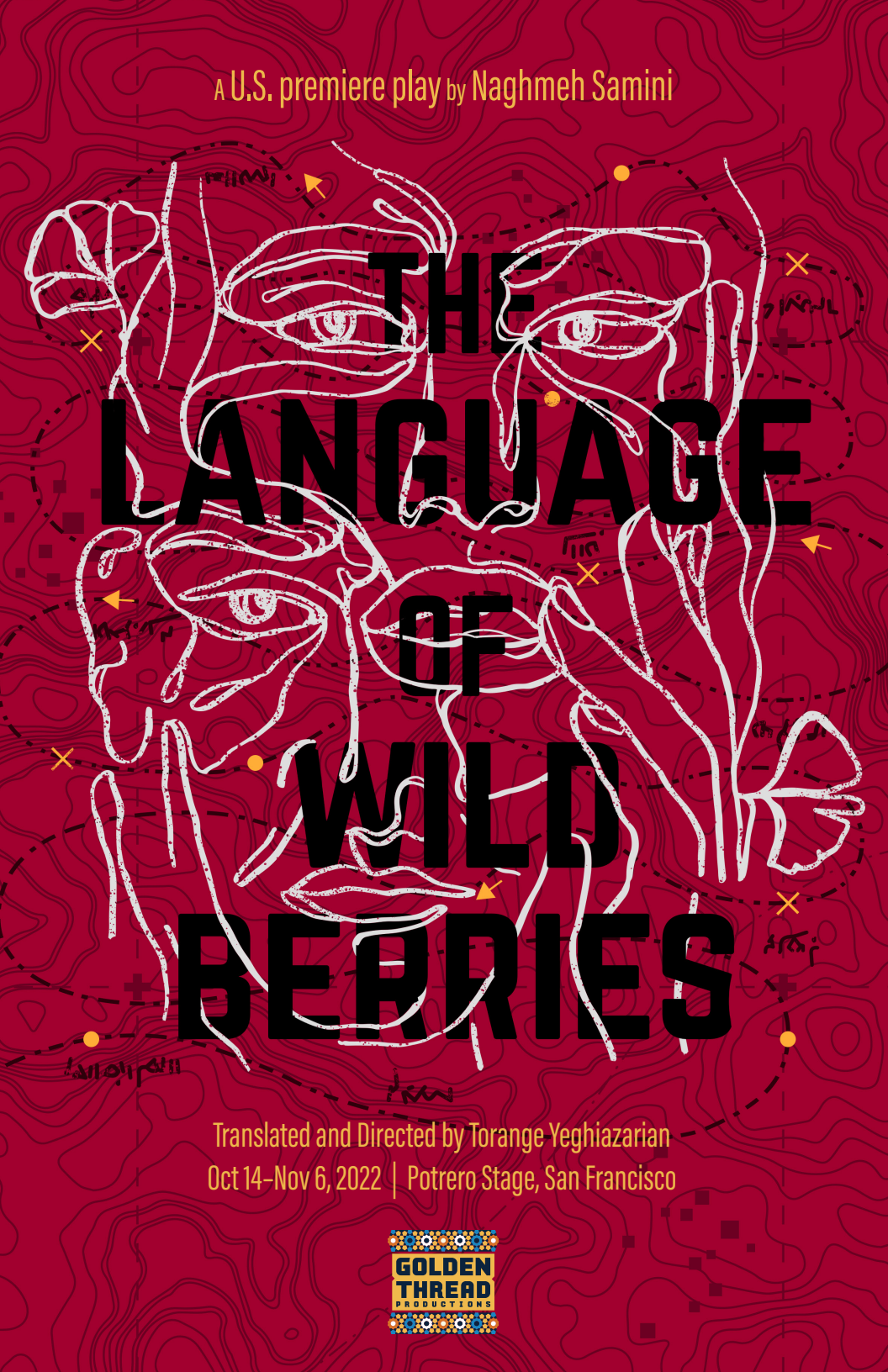


A U.S. premiere play by Naghmeh Samini



# THE LANGUAGE OF WILD BERRIES

Translated and Directed by Torange Veghiazarian  
Oct 14–Nov 6, 2022 | Potrero Stage, San Francisco



## FROM THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



Welcome! I am so delighted you're joining us for the long-awaited U.S. premiere of *The Language of Wild Berries* by Iranian playwright Naghmeh Samini. The play was translated from Persian by Torange Yeghiazarian and was slated for our 2020 Season of International Women. When that season got canceled, Torange produced and directed an audio version of the play, which I listened to while still in Lebanon interviewing for Golden Thread's Executive Artistic Director's job. I vividly remember feeling captivated by the inventiveness of the language and the dramatic structure of the play. I appreciate Naghmeh's extraordinary skill to present a simple story about love and marriage in a completely unpredictable and original way. I also love how she delicately obscures the lines between the personal and the political by employing recent Iranian political events as a backdrop. To be producing *The Language of Wild Berries* today with Naghmeh and Torange, a powerhouse pair, is an absolute pleasure and honor.

At the time of writing this note, women in Iran are leading the Mahsa Amini protests, chanting "Women, Life, Freedom" among other slogans, putting their own lives at risk as they demand basic civil rights including an optional *hijab*. I would like to dedicate this production to them. Like Donya, they have a voice and they are using it. We stand in solidarity with women who are fighting to assert their rights over their bodies, everywhere, from the U.S. to Iran.

*The Language of Wild Berries* is the final show of our 2022 season "To Fight with Love," my first season as Artistic Director of Golden Thread, which celebrates our commitment to dialogue, solidarity, and innovation. I am indebted to our community of audiences, artists, and patrons who have embraced me with warmth and care during this transition. I am also grateful to Golden Thread's Trustees and Staff Team, without whom our work won't be possible. You rock!

We can't wait to share our next season with you all. For now, enjoy the show and fight forward!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, likely belonging to Sahar Assaf.

Sahar Assaf  
Executive Artistic Director

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Golden Thread Productions presents

*U.S. Premiere*

# THE LANGUAGE OF WILD BERRIES

by Naghmeh Samini

translated & directed by Torange Yeghiazarian

## CAST (in order of appearance)

Danial .....	Zaya Kolia
Donya .....	Dina Zarif
Davood .....	Damien Seperi*

## PRODUCTION TEAM

Production Dramaturg .....	Heather Rastovac Akbarzadeh
Dialect Coach .....	Lynne Soffer
Fight Choreographer .....	Carla Pantoja
Scenic Design .....	Kate Boyd <sup>§</sup>
Lighting Design .....	Cassie Barnes <sup>§</sup>
Sound Design .....	Derek Schmidt
Costume Design .....	Brooke Jennings
Props Design .....	Samantha Alexa
Graphic Design .....	Navid G. Maghami
Composer .....	Mohammad Talani <sup>§</sup>

Stage Manager/Board Op .....	Camille La'akea Wong
Assistant Stage Manager .....	Atusa Assadi
Production Manager .....	Dan Holland
Technical Director .....	David Lam
Head Carpenter .....	Megan Hillard
Car Builder .....	David Gardner
Load-in Crew .....	Carson Blickenstaff

\* Member of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers

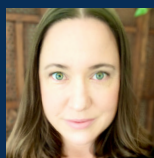
<sup>§</sup> Golden Thread Productions Resident Artist

Golden Thread thanks the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Sam Mazza Foundation for their support.

Golden Thread is a resident company of Potrero Stage, operated by PlayGround, and this show is presented as part of PlayGround's Potrero Stage Presenting Program. Our headquarters are located on the ancestral home of the Ramaytush Ohlone.



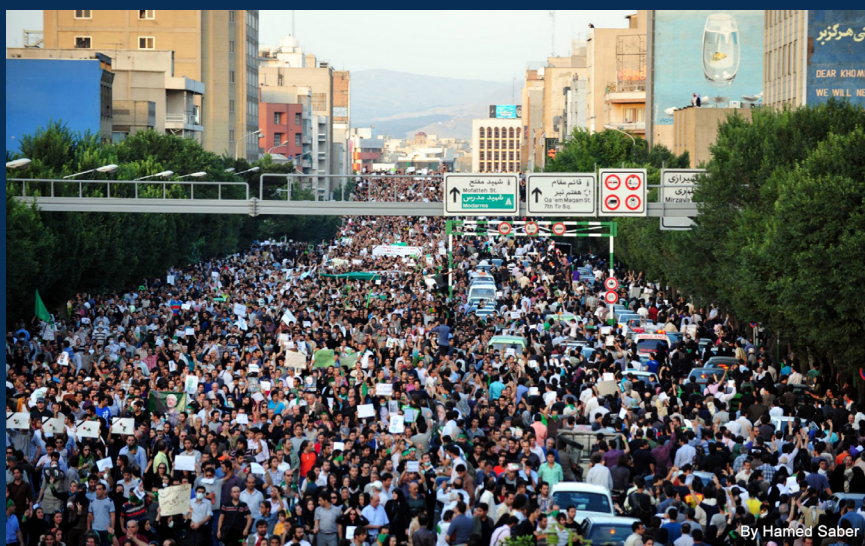
## FROM THE DRAMATURG — HEATHER RASTOVAC AKBARZADEH



### Iran's 2009 presidential elections and the Green Movement protests

*The Language of Wild Berries*, by Naghmeh Samini, is a nuanced theatrical illustration of how the personal, social, and political become intimately intertwined. As Samini explained in our dramaturgical interview, the play moves “in between a personal experience and a social-political situation.” (2022) The play’s two protagonists, Donya and Davood, are part of the generation of young Iranians whose lives have been greatly impacted by the aftermath of the Green Movement protests surrounding Iran’s contested 2009 presidential election. In the weeks leading up to Iran’s Election Day on June 12, 2009, the Green Movement emerged composed of Iranians in support of the reformist presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi. Iranians from all walks of life, particularly youth and young adults, sought to oust incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Within a few hours at the end of Election Day, authorities claimed to have hand-counted millions of votes and announced Ahmadinejad’s victory by a two-third majority. Because of these results, many Iranians believed the election had been rigged, questioning the legitimacy of democracy in Iran.

In the weeks that followed, thousands of Iranians defied official bans on demonstrations as protestors peacefully rallied in city centers across Iran in order to demand, “Rai-e man kojast?” or “Where is my vote?” As part of government crackdowns,



Green Movement protests, Haft-e Tir Square, Tehran, Iran, June 17, 2009. Photographer: Hamed Saber





protesters faced extreme brutality at the hands of official military forces and quasi-official militia groups, and thousands were arrested, interrogated, and imprisoned. Not since the 1979 Islamic Revolution had such large-scale demonstrations taken place in Iran, and large protests also occurred throughout major cities in the Iranian diaspora. Iranian Studies scholar Hamid Dabashi refers to the Green Movement as a "grassroot struggle of Iranians in attaining democracy, civil rights, freedom, and accountability of the government." (Nikzadfar 2011, 15) Although protests in Iran decreased in the months following the election, in large part because of the state's violent repression, the Green Movement continues to reverberate as a pivotal moment in the lives and psyches of especially young Iranians. Iranians persist in demanding their civil and human rights, as demonstrated by the current mass protests in Iran following the recent death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman who died while in police custody in Tehran.

## The Tower of Babel and the Confusion of Tongues

Throughout *The Language of Wild Berries*, you will hear multiple references to the mythical Tower of Babel. Best known in the U.S. for the Biblical story in Genesis 11:1–9, this myth provides an explanation as to why the world's people speak diverse languages. According to this story, members of the world's unified human race, which spoke a single language, came to the land of Shinar in Babylonia sometime after the Great Flood described in Genesis chapters 6 - 9. In order to "make a name" for themselves, they collaborated in building a city with a tower so tall it nearly touched Heaven.



*The Tower of Babel.* Pieter Bruegel, 1563. Oil on canvas. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna.



Eventually, it is theorized that God considers the tower a threat to His kingdom and, as punishment, He scatters the people throughout the world and confounds their speech so that they can no longer understand each other.

In our dramaturgical interview, Samini explains that her specific inspiration for the play's conceptual engagement with language and the Tower of Babel comes from an older Sumerian story, *Enmerkar and the Lord Aratta*. This legendary account (composed in the Neo-Sumerian period, ca. 21st century BC) similarly describes a "confusion of tongues." Samini further explains why these myths resonated with her: "Everything started from that mythical moment, when God punished us by not letting us understand each other. God didn't kill people or cut their hands; God just didn't let them communicate with each other. I thought, what a very horrible punishment for human beings!" (2022)

— Heather Rastovac Akbarzadeh, *Production Dramaturg*

## Interested in learning more?

**Scan the QR code** to access our digital dramaturgical packet for more in-depth information, images & background on *The Language of Wild Berries*!



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### Sources:

- ▶ Navid Nikzadfar. 2011. "Introduction." In *The Green Movement in Iran* by Hamid Dabashi. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers.
- ▶ Naghmeh Samini. July 9, 2022. Interview with Production Dramaturg Heather Rastovac Akbarzadeh.

### Further Reading:

- ▶ Maral Karimi. 2018. *The Iranian Green Movement of 2009: Reverberating Echoes of Resistance*. New York and London: Lexington Books.
- ▶ Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, Eds. 2011. *The People Reloaded: The Green Movement and the Struggle for Iran's Future*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Books.



## FROM THE DIRECTOR — TORANGE YEGHIAZARIAN



They say a play is never done. This is even truer for a translation. Once the play is in the actors' hands, once the words come out of their mouth, once they feel the emotions, many new discoveries are made. Every iteration is an opportunity to fine tune. I'm thrilled to have had the chance to work on *The Language of Wild Berries* both as an audio play back in 2020, and now as a staged play in 2022. This time, I found myself imagining a completely different staging from two years ago. After directing the audio play, I realized the narrative is extremely layered, playful, and theatrical. Samini is a playwright that is deeply aware of the theatrical form. She writes to take advantage of the stage and the presence of the audience. She writes to empower the director and the actors to embark on an imaginative ride; to trust the magic of Theatre. In directing the play this fall, I found myself taking off, as if riding on a magic carpet. The play sparked my imagination in a new way and I realized so much can be left to the imagination, which begged the question, what is essential to show? And my answer was very simple: the emotions, the playfulness. And so, I focused on that. I hope you have as much fun watching the play as we had creating it.

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## FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT — NAGHMEH SAMINI



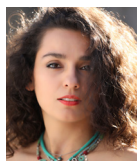
Writing a play is just like a journey to an undiscovered land, without a GPS! It doesn't matter how many plays one has written; once you start writing a new play, all of its landscapes appear new and unknown. I have written more than thirty plays in over thirty years and each one of them has been a different experience. During my journey of writing

*The Language of Wild Berries*, I remember that I wanted to write about lost love, lost communication, and lost freedom on different personal and political levels. At the beginning, the road was foggy and my vision was blurry. I couldn't see the right direction. I turned onto a side road of a comedy and drove on that road for one year until I realized I had become lost. So, I went all the way back to the beginning. The new road was more tragic and, with every step, I had to remember my forgotten memories. I understood that once more I needed to change the direction. I worked on the play for one year after that until, on a rare sunny day in Seattle, I realized that I had reached the end of this journey. Really? The end? No! When I met Torange three years ago and she said that she wanted to translate and direct the play for the stage at Golden Thread, I understood that a new journey has begun.



## CAST

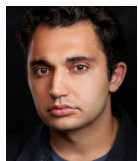
**Dina Zarif (Donya)** (she/her) Born and raised in Iran, Dina is a Multidisciplinary performing artist, vocalist and curator. Started acting under Bahram Beyzai's training, she is the title role of *MITRA* (2021) film which premiered in IFFR 2021. Shadow actress at Cinematic shadow play *Feathers of Fire* which is recipient of 2019 UNIMA for excellence in live performance, Dina is artistic & managing Director at Red Poppy Art House in SF. She received her MA in Landscape-Architecture from Tehran University.



**Damien Seperi\* (Davood)** (he/him) This production marks Damien's 3rd appearance on the Golden Thread stage. He was previously seen as Said in *Autobiography of a Terrorist* and in a number of short plays in 2015's Reorient festival. His most recent roles were with Capital Stage in Sacramento, Hillbarn Theatre in Redwood City and San Jose Stage. He received his training at D.V.C., SF State University and A.C.T. He would like to give big thanks to Torange, the cast and crew and to all of you who read these words and support the arts. Thank you!



**Zaya Kolia (Danial)** (he/him) is an Assyrian, Bay Area native. He received his Bachelor in Fine Arts in Acting from the Academy of Art University where his credits include Flan in *Six Degrees of Separation*, Joshua and Martin in *Cloud Nine*, Barnett in *Crimes of the Heart*, Aldolpho in *The Drowsy Chaperone* and Kevin Rosario in *In the Heights*. Other credits include Frank Jr. in *Saturday Night*



*Fever at Broadway by the Bay*, *The Wizard of Oz* at Berkeley Playhouse, Khadim in *The North Pool* at Bread & Butter, The Captain in *Anything Goes* at Hillbarn Theatre, Ludovic and Augenti in *Passion*, Harry and Martin in *Cloud Nine* at The Custom Made Theatre Company, Azad in *On the Periphery* with Golden Thread and Crowded Fire Theatre company, *Tiny Beautiful Things* at Los Altos Stage Company and most recently *Guys and Dolls* at Peninsula Ballet Theater as Sky Masterson. He now resides in LA where he just participated in the Hollywood Fringe Festival and a tour of *Romeo and Juliet!* Zaya is very excited to share this very important story with you all!

## CREATIVE TEAM

**Naghmeh Samini (Playwright)**



was born in Iran and received her BA in Drama and MA in Cinema from the University of Tehran. She did her PhD in Art Studies at the University of Tarbiat Modarres in Tehran with a thesis focused on Drama and Mythology. More than twenty of her plays have been staged in Iran, France, India, Canada, the United States and other countries. These include *Sleeping in an Empty Cup*, *Sky Horses Rain Ashes*, *Making Faces* and *The Home*. Her screenplays, *Main Line*, *Heiran* and *Three Women* won awards. In 2007 critics selected her as one of the five top playwrights in Iran. Her plays are experimental in structure and handle a variety of topical subjects at personal and sociopolitical levels. Inspired by *One Thousand and One Nights*, she uses magic realism and non-linear narratives in her plays. One of her recent plays entitled *The King and the Mathematician: A Legend* (2012) was selected by UNESCO as one of the cultural achievements of the year.



## Torange Yeghiazarian (Director & Translator)



(she/her) is a playwright, director, and translator. She is the Founding Artistic Director Emeritus of Golden Thread Productions where she

directed numerous premieres including *OH MY SWEET LAND* by Amir Nizar Zuabi, and *OUR ENEMIES: LIVELY SCENES OF LOVE AND COMBAT* by Yussef El Guindi. Torange's work is featured in "New Iranian Plays," "Middle Eastern American Theatre," "Performing Iran," "Salaam. Peace: An Anthology of Middle Eastern-American Drama," and "Casting a Movement," among others. [TorangeYeghiazarian.com](http://TorangeYeghiazarian.com)

## Heather Rastovac Akbarzadeh (Production Dramaturg)



(she/her) is a scholar, artist, and educator with two decades as a dancer-choreographer, artistic director, curator,

and dramaturg among diasporic MENA/SWANA communities. Heather earned her Ph.D. in Performance Studies from UC Berkeley, where she completed a dissertation on diasporic Iranian dancers and performance artists, followed by a postdoctoral fellowship in Dance Studies at Stanford University (2016 - 2018) and a postdoctoral fellowship in Asian American Studies at UC Davis (2018 - 2020).

## Samantha Alexa (Props Designer)

## Atusa Assadi (Assistant Stage Manager)



(she/her) is an Iranian-American film student and writer from the Bay Area. Atusa first worked with Golden Thread in 2017 as a performer in

a New Threads production of *As Soon As Impossible*. She also worked as a production assistant on *Oh My Sweet Land* in 2018. Atusa is so excited to be

back at Golden Thread and couldn't imagine a better show to jump back into the company with than *The Language of Wild Berries*. While working at Middle East Market in Berkeley, an effective community center of the local Iranian diaspora, Atusa became passionate about MENA storytelling, stories about queerness, family (found and blood), resistance movements, and food. She believes that cooking and eating with loved ones, as well as sharing favorite films and literature together is the greatest way to spend time.

## Cassie Barnes § (Lighting Designer)

## Kate Boyd § (Scenic Designer)



designs scenery and lighting in the Bay Area. She is a proud Resident Artist at Golden Thread and recently designed lights for *Drowning in*

*Cairo*. She works frequently for Aurora Theater and New Conservatory. Recent shows include *Father/ Daughter* at Aurora, *Nine Parts of Desire* at the Portland Armory and *Noura* at Marin Theater Company. She has also worked for Magic Theater, Center Rep, Merola Opera, and Theatreworks. Kate teaches stagecraft and design Lick-Wilmerding High School and was a recipient of the Gerbode Design Fellowship.

## Dan Holland (Production Manager)



(he/him) is a sound designer/production manager based in San Jose. He serves as Production Manager & Technical Director at EnActe Arts

and as A/V Technician at City Lights Theater Company. He is also a member of Theatrical Sound Designers & Composers. Recent credits include: *The Jungle Book: Rudyard Revised* (co-sound designer, EnActe Arts), *Fashion Fable* (production

manager, Chocolate Heads), *As Soon As Impossible* (sound designer, Stanford University), and *Indecent* (audio engineer, SF Playhouse).

### Brooke Jennings (Costume Designer)



is delighted to return to Golden Thread Productions with this moving show. A graduate of UC Santa Cruz's Theater Arts Masters Program,

Brooke is an award winning Costume Designer working in the Bay Area and New York. Her recent credits include San Jose Stage Company (*The Great Leap*), Shotgun Players (*The Claim*, *Vinegar Tom*, *Arcadia*), San Francisco Playhouse (*You Mean To Do Me Harm*, *The Effect*, *Colossal*, *The Nether*), We Players (*Psychopomp*, *Caesar Maximus*, *Roman Women*, *Ondine*), Magic Theater (asst. designer: *Monument*, *A Lie of the Mind*, *Bad Jews*), Custom Made Theater Company (*Belleville*, *Six Degrees of Separation*, *Sam and Dede* (SF and NY Premieres), City Lights Theater (*Rocky Horror Show*), and Santa Cruz Shakespeare (asst. Designer, *A Year with Frog and Toad*). She is a recipient of 2022 The Ignite Fund.

### Camille La'akea Wong (Stage Manager)



is a graduate of Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa. Recent projects include *Tiny Beautiful Things* (Plethos Productions),

*Pirates of Penzance* (Lyric Theatre), and *Into the Woods* (Lyric Theatre). Camille is excited to be working with Golden Thread Productions! Many thanks to Camille's friends and family for their support.

### David Lam (Technical Director)

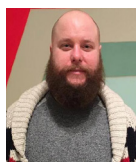
This marks David's first show with Golden Thread Theatre. Throughout his theatre career he has held the positions of Stage Manager, Technical Director, Set Builder, and Sound Engineer. For the past 25 years

he has worked for bay area companies such as 42nd Street Moon, Diablo Theatre Company, Tri-Valley Repertory Theater, Contra Costa Civic Theater, Ross Valley Players, Marin Shakespeare Company, and Town Hall Theatre Company in Lafayette to name a few. He is currently the Technical Director for St. Ignatius College Preparatory School. Enjoy the Show!

### Carla Pantoja (Fight Choreographer)

(she/her) is a certified stage combat instructor through Dueling Arts International and founding member of local Dueling Arts San Francisco. As fight director, she worked with SF Shakespeare Festival, SF Mime Troupe, Crowded Fire, Golden Thread, Cal Shakes, and The Magic among others. She was in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival acting company for 2020 and recently returned from the 2022 season as the Festival's first female fight director.

### Derek Schmidt (Sound Designer)



(he/him) is a composer, songwriter, sound designer, and music educator living in San Francisco. He is a founder and host of Homophonic at Martuni's, SF's

only queer singer/songwriter showcase. In 2021, Derek received his M.A. in Music at California State University, East Bay, focusing on composition. Currently, he is teaching private music lessons, working on new compositions, and continuing with sound design.

### Mohammad Talani § (Composer)

Born in Iran, Mohammad is a San Francisco-based musician, actor, and videographer. He has collaborated in different fields with several artists including Marcus Shelby, Stephen Daldry, Bahram Beyzaei, Babak Jalali, and others.

\* Member of Actors' Equity Association

§ Golden Thread Productions Resident Artist

## Special Thanks

To our community partner, the Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies at the San Francisco State University, and to Persis Karim, Neda Nobari Distinguished Chair and Director.

And to the members of *The Language of Wild Berries*' Community Council: Kian Beyzavi, Jamileh Davoodi, Artin Der Minassians, Nazy Kaviani, Kia Mousavi, Babak Sani, Kam Shadan, and Bella Warda.

The playwright Naghmeh Samini would like to thank Shiva Masudi who first directed *The Language of Wild Berries* in Iran and Mohammad Rezaii Rad who helped develop the play.

## Native Land Acknowledgement

Potrero Stage, as well as our headquarters, are located on the ancestral home of the Ramaytush Ohlone.

The Bay Area is the homeland of the Multiple Ohlone Tribes, including the Ramaytush in San Francisco, the Chochenyo and the Karkin Confederated Villages of Lisjan, Him'ren, Ohlone Tribe, Inc and Muwekma in the East Bay, along with the Bay Miwok, Plains Miwok in Contra Costa, the Yokuts in the South Bay and Central Valley. We are committed to supporting and celebrating our Native communities in partnership with The Friendship House in San Francisco, and the Intertribal Friendship House and the Sogorea Te Land Trust in Oakland.

We acknowledge and are grateful to WeSeeYouWAT and the Intertribal Friendship House for their help in developing these statements.



Potrero Stage is a 99-seat state-of-the-art performance space located in the heart of San Francisco's Potrero Hill neighborhood, operated by PlayGround, and serving as home to some of the Bay Area's leading new play developers and producers, including PlayGround, Crowded Fire, Golden Thread, and Playwrights Foundation, among others. For more information or to inquire about rentals, email [info@potrerostage.org](mailto:info@potrerostage.org) or call (415) 992-6677.



Actors' Equity Association (AEA), founded in 1913, represents more than 49,000 actors and stage managers in the United States. Equity seeks to advance, promote and foster the art of live theatre as an essential component of our society. Equity negotiates wages and working conditions, providing a wide range of benefits, including health and pension plans. AEA is a member of the AFL-CIO, and is affiliated with FIA, an international organization of performing arts unions. The Equity emblem is our mark of excellence. [actorsequity.org](http://actorsequity.org)

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# STATEMENT OF SOLIDARITY

## TO OUR IRANIAN COMMUNITIES IN THE BAY AREA AND OUR FRIENDS EVERYWHERE.

We, at Golden Thread Productions, stand in solidarity with women who are fighting to assert their rights over their bodies, everywhere, from the U.S. to Iran. Consistent with our mission, we are committed to uplifting the voices of those fighting for justice and equality. Using the words of our founder, Iranian playwright and director Torange Yeghiazarian, "Women are the backbone of our communities [ . . . ] Women have been organizing and building communities for centuries. They may do it quietly but they are consistent and committed." No doubt Iranian women have been consistent and committed to their fight for equality but today they are fighting loudly and we must hear them. We are humbled by the fearless, powerful and peaceful acts of women cutting their hair and burning their scarves in public squares. May we all have their courage to do the acts of change we are committed to in our communities. Their bravery serves all of us, everywhere, and it's a striking reminder that none of us are free until all of us are free.

**IN SOLIDARITY AND WITH GRATITUDE,  
GOLDEN THREAD TEAM**







## MIDDLE EAST CENTER STAGE ART. ACTIVISM. FAMILY.

Golden Thread Productions, founded in 1996, is the first American theatre company devoted to the Middle East. We produce 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 a 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.



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Anonymous (x7), Sahar Assaf, Anna & Amer Budayr, Alexa Hauser in memory of Terry Lamb, Mona Masri, Jumana Muwafi, Tarik Muwafi, John O'Farrell & Gloria Principe, Jeffrey Prucher, Sara Razavi & Jillian Goldstein, The Wallace Foundation, Torange Yeghiazarian

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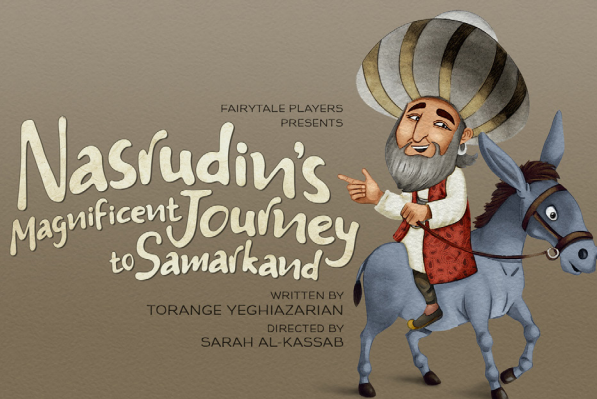
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