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## Arabs, Muslims present art without borders

By Kristin Tillotson; Staff Writer

Rumi, a 13th-century Muslim born in what is now Afghanistan, is one of the top-selling poets in America. But his popularity has yet to rub off on writers and artists of Islamic and/or Middle Eastern descent who live and work in this country.

This isn't because their numbers are few, or that they're all hacks. It's not because the Qur'an forbids artistic endeavors, as Taliban propagandists claimed. You could say that, in large part, it's a matter of politics.

For decades - and particularly since Sept. 11 - the headline-making, all-consuming politics of the Middle East and northern Africa have gobbled up virtually all the attention the American majority has paid to the region, its many cultures and its people - as well as Americans whose ancestors hail from Muslim countries.

These artists face not only stereotypes about their ethnic or religious backgrounds, but also about the very existence of a cultural life. When was the last time you used the word "Arab" and "entertainment" (let alone "humor") in the same sentence?

Enter "Beyond Belly Dancers, Bombers and Billionaires - Arabs and Muslims Out Loud!" This showcase of a dozen performers, being staged tonight at Intermedia Arts in south Minneapolis, spotlights a spectrum of creative expression including, but not exclusive to, political roots. Tying the acts together is the theme "Voluntary Testimony" as a response to the thousands of Middle Easterners who have been detained and questioned by the government over the past several months. The tongue-in-cheek kicker on the press release reads, "They are not suspect, but by the end of the evening, they might be."

Arabic and Muslim artistic output "has a history that is as rich and varied as the Arab world," says Kathryn Haddad, co-organizer of the event. For example, she said, "Some Muslims believe it is wrong to depict human forms, but in Iran, artists have a strong tradition of doing

that."

Haddad, a teacher at Bloomington Kennedy High School, also is director of **Mizna** (<http://www.mizna.org>), a three-year-old art and literary journal that publishes creative work by Arab-Americans from across the country. Many of the "Out Loud" performers also are involved with **Mizna** (an Arabic word approximating "the protective cloud over the desert"). The lineup, which Haddad said varies "in age, gender, ethnicity and generation of immigration," includes:

- Live music by Salah Abdel Fattah, known in the Twin Cities for his work with the contemporary Arabic band Layali Sharq, and Jehad Adwan, a Fulbright scholar and Ph.D. nursing student at the University of Minnesota who also plays the oud, a Middle Eastern lute.
- Paintings by Iraqi-born Adnan Shati, whose murals adorn the Sindbad Bakery and Deli as well as medical-building cafes in downtown Minneapolis and Bloomington.
- A dramatic performance by Haddad and writer/ researcher Fouzi Slisli, who has advanced degrees in drama and literature.
- The film "In My Own Skin," by Jennifer Jajeh, a Palestinian-American filmmaker based in California.
- Poetry readings and more by Twin Cities writers.

This sampling exemplifies the range of backgrounds that often get smushed together in outsiders' minds, no matter how many modifiers are attached to the nouns. One common misconception: "A lot of people here don't seem to realize how many [of us] are Christian," said Haddad, 35, who was born in Minnesota and is of Lebanese-Christian descent.

Wanted: Western exposure

Born in Egypt to a Turkish mother and Lebanese father, Fawzia A. Reda said Middle Easterners can't expect the average American to be knowledgeable about their cultures "because access has been limited." Reda, who has degrees in architecture and graphic art, has lived in Minneapolis since 1972. Through grants over the past several years, she has developed projects to connect Arab and Islamic heritage with American culture at large and is writing a book about the children of Israel and Palestine.

"You cannot reach a full understanding of a problem by thinking of it only in political terms," said Reda, who will read and show photographs from her work-in-progress tonight. "You have to examine its social, psychological and cultural aspects."

You also have to watch out for hyphens, said Moukhtar Kocache.

Kocache, director of visual and media arts for the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council in New York, is in town this week to participate in workshops at Intermedia Arts. He also serves on the board of a small international group called the Arab Image Foundation (<http://www.fai.org.lb>), which seeks and archives historically significant photographs from all over the Middle East.

While Kocache accepts hyphenations in such terms as "Arab-American" when they're accurate, he chafes a bit when they're used as "a way of assuring friendliness," he said.

"Arabs have been trying to get an American identity on the map. Great, but in the process we can't equate an Arab as the antithesis of an Arab-American. For example, I am not an American. I don't have a green card. Yet the media consistently identifies me as an Arab-American. Does it make me more familiar, less scary? That's the core of the misunderstanding I'd like to see cleared up."

We can only guess what Rumi would have thought about hyphens. But 700 or so years ago, he had this (translated from the Farsi) to say about pride of craft:

I've said before that every craftsman/ searches for what's not there/ to practice his craft./ A builder looks for the rotten hole/ where the roof caved in./ A water-carrier/ picks the empty pot. A carpenter/ stops at the house with no door. Workers rush toward some hint/ of emptiness, which they then/ start to fill. Their hope, though,/ is for emptiness, so don't think/ you must avoid it. It contains/ what you need!

We can assume this sentiment applies to art as well as craft. Tonight, the performers of "Muslims and Arabs Out Loud!" will attempt to fill their share of the emptiness - and point out that, in terms of Arab and Muslim contributions to culture, it's been filled all along.

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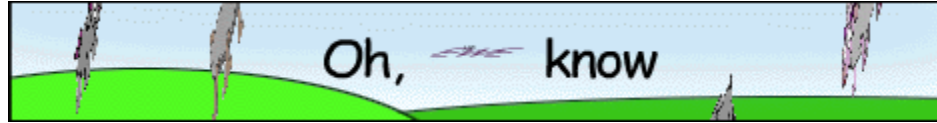
Beyond Belly Dancers, Bombers and Billionaires: Arabs and Muslims Out Loud!

What: A showcase of music, dramatic performance, poetry reading and paintings by artists and writers from Muslim and Middle Eastern backgrounds.

When: 8 p.m. today.

Where: Intermedia Arts, 2822 Lyndale Av. S., Mpls. , 612-871-4444.

Tickets: Free to \$5 on a sliding scale.



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