

Saturday November 26, 2011

—There's the fortune cookie Rumi, the New Age version of "Confucius Say," spouting vague cliches that could be from anywhere, anytime—and then there's the great Persian lyric poet—and the Rumi of the tales in *The Masnavi*, "the Quran in Persian" (as poet Jami called it), his magnum opus, a kind of verse epic in all moods of the diversity, inner and outer, of medieval Islam.

Hafiz Karmali, who staged the medieval parable 'Island of Animals' for Golden Thread and the Afghan Coalition a few years back, put on his adaptation of seven stories from *The Masnavi* last weekend as 'Rumi x 7,' theater-in-the-round, a one-ring circus of delights, at the Islamic Cultural Center of Northern California in downtown Oakland, inaugurating Golden Thread's project, Islam 101, performances over the next three years at different locations to educate about and explore the legacy of Islam as a worldwide cultural and spiritual movement, "as an Abrahamic religion, the third dimension ... in what's been heretofore called the Judeo-Christian tradition."

His ensemble included practitioners of the circus arts, musicians, dancers—often all three in one performer—pitching their wares from Rumi in a variety of styles, from slapstick (and just plain shtick) to a little *Commedia Del'Arte*, silent movie comedy to whirling dervish dance (the observance Rumi introduced to his Sufi order), acrobatics to—the stunner—a New Orleans funeral march to celebrate Rumi's wake, which the poet declared in advance to be a joyous occasion.

The exuberant cast included Jamie Coventry, Aylin Guvenc, Rachel L. Jacobs, Mahsa Matin, Aliah Najmabadi, Maruf Noyoft and Wiley Naman Strasser. The production team was Jim Cave, Taylor Gonzalez, Jamayla Kiswani, Wan-Yin Tang, Junelle-Johannah Taguas, Ninva Warda and Daniel Yelen.

(In fact, Golden Thread hopes to reprise 'Rumi x 7' on and/or around December 17—the anniversary of the poet's death in Anatolia, 1273, the day he's traditionally celebrated, in San Francisco. Check goldenthread.org for updates on showtimes and location.)

Ralph Waldo Emerson adapted from a German translation the opening of *The Masnavi*, "The Song of the Reed" (performed in 'Rumi x 7'), which he called "The Flute" (and mistakenly attributed to a later Persian poet, Hilali):

"Hark what, now loud, now low, the pining flute complains,/Without tongue, yellow-cheeked, full of winds that wail and sigh;/Saying, Sweetheart! the old mystery remains,—/If I am I; thou, thou; or thou art I?"

- *Ken Bullock*