

prose to performance

“Persimmons” by Amani Elkassabani

In “Persimmons,” the ten-year-old daughter of middle class immigrants to the U.S. from Cairo wakes to find herself and her family in . . . Kansas. As Nadya recounts navigating her new surroundings, puberty, and sexual assault, she draws upon uncertain memories of unlikely objects that helped to establish her personal borders and boundaries. Her narrative not only explores the tenuous nature of memory but also the physical processes of remembering, and telling, by which we create meaning for our present lives.

- * **Informal solo performance** (running time, about 35 minutes)
Michelle Murad

- * **Break** (5 minutes)

- * **Discussion: The Role of Memory in Storytelling and Performance**
facilitator, Amani Elkassabani, with Michelle Murad, John Fiscella (director)

Storytelling

To a large extent, remembering is a necessary precursor to storytelling. But personal memory can be nebulous, even unreliable, particularly when one attempts to recall painful or shameful experiences. As storytellers, how can we embrace this fluidity of memory so that we can not only recall past experiences, but invest our present lives with meaning, empowering ourselves and our characters in the process? How do our experiences as storytellers parallel our experiences as Arab Americans? How can we as a community use memory to reclaim our past and determine our present identity?

Performance

Memory is embodied in performances of traditional, oral storytelling. But even when performing from written narratives, we relate to words ‘by heart’, opening ourselves to bodies of memory, sensations, images, motion, sounds, inner maps. How can these sources help us to challenge silence or invisibility, to remember, to find words? How do these sources come into play in performance through presence, speech, gesture, rhythm, gaze, and the exchange between a speaker and listeners? How can performing our stories help us to recognize our individual choices, as well as our many, and often conflicting, ties to others?

Amani Elkassabani, born in Alexandria, Egypt, is an author and a teacher. Her short fiction has appeared in *Mizna* and in the anthology *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out* edited by Fawzia Afzal-Khan and published in 2005 by Interlink Press. She won a QALAM Award for short fiction in 2000 and the first place RAWI Creative Prose Award for her story “Red Sandals” in 2004. She has taught at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Arkansas and currently teaches Advanced Composition and Literature at Thomas S. Wootton High School, a National Blue Ribbon School, in Rockville, Maryland. She is also at work on a collection of short stories.

Michelle Allegra Murad is a senior at the University of Maryland, studying theater and performance. She is of mixed heritage, her father of Syrian background and her mother, Italian. Most of her family is from Utica, New York, and Paterson, New Jersey. After school she plans to move to New York City to pursue acting work.

John Fiscella (director) is a community artist and teacher. Most recently he directed *Anna Bella Eema*, a spoken and sung narrative by Lisa D’Amour, with music by Chris Sidorfsky, at Philadelphia Fringe Festival. He has taught independently and at schools including Marlboro College, Boston University, UMass - Amherst, U. Maryland, collaborating with students on a series of pieces on deciphering languages of violence. He is of Lebanese and Sicilian descent.

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This performance of “Persimmons” is being developed to be presented as part of a program with two other pieces—*The Error*, a play by Adania Shibli, and the short story “My Birth and that of others in my family” by Mahmoud Kaabour.