

"WE THE PEOPLE PROJECT 2011: THE LIVES, ART AND CULTURES OF MUSLIM AND ARAB WOMEN"



Dr. Huda Totonji's "Calligraphy Projections II" is on display as part of the "Speak Your Mind: The Art, Stories and Cultures of Arab and Muslim Women" at the Galleries of Takoma Park Community Center. The exhibition is part of the "We the People Project 2011" event that runs through June 25.

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COURTESY JAMEELA ALTER

Author Jameela Alter will speak about her book "On Clipped Wings" at Saturday's event.

'WE THE PEOPLE' HIGHLIGHTS MUSLIM AND ARAB WOMEN ARTISTS

Raising VOICES

BY TOPHER FORHECZ

STAFF WRITER

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While Malik was pushing a double stroller with her two children in it, a guest at the other wedding confronted her. He had a problem with her attire.

"I turned around and gave him a little piece of my mind and told him to get an education," Malik recalls. "I think that sort of shocked him and forced him to want to do something about it. So as soon as my husband appeared, he wanted to take it to violence."

The encounter was the inspiration for "Unveiled," a one-woman play Malik will perform at Empowered Women International's (EWI) "We are the People Project 2011: The Lives, Art, and Cultures of Muslim and Arab Women" on Saturday at the Takoma Park Community Center.

The play's characters are five Muslim women with very different backgrounds from a hip-hop loving Londoner to a Moroccan-American.

The show debuted in 2009 at the 16th Street Theater in Chicago. Malik says she hopes the show illustrates how diverse Muslim women can be by focusing on their reasons for wearing the veil.



"You can't put them in a box," Malik says. "You'll find Muslim women who'll cover their hair who are rappers, who love hip-hop as a form of expression, and you'll find more traditional women who wear the veil just for God."

At "We the People," Malik will not perform the roles of all five women so she can have time for a longer discussion. Malik is currently a member of the Goodman Theatre's Playwrights Unit in Chicago. Currently, she is working on staged readings of her new production "The Mecca Tales."

"We the People" is hosted by Empowered Women International, which was founded by Marga Fripp in 2002. A former broadcast journalist who emigrated from Romania in 2001,

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Marga Fripp, Empowered Women International founder and president, and show curator Tom Block, collaborated for the exhibit "Speak Your Mind: The Art, Stories and Cultures of Arab and Muslim Women" at the Galleries of Takoma Park Community Center. The exhibition is part of the "We the People Project 2011" event that runs through June 25.

See VOICES, Page C-4

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Hene Zughaib's "Abaya Driving" is on display as part of the "Speak Your Mind: The Art, Stories and Cultures of Arab and Muslim Women" at the Galleries of Takoma Park Community Center. The exhibition is part of the "We the People Project 2011."

VOICES

Continued from Page C-1

Fripp was inspired to create the organization while taking English classes at Montgomery County. Her fellow students also were immigrants and as she learned more about their unique histories and talents, she wanted to showcase them in some way.

"They are all paid minimum wage ... meaning restaurants and babysitting, and I just thought this was completely unreal," Fripp recalls. "I didn't realize there was so much talent and all this talent was in one classroom."

Fripp set to work creating a space for the women in Alexandria. Still, she felt it would not help them reach a larger audience.

"We realized quickly that it was not enough to provide a network of support," Fripp says. "It

was not enough to have a gallery and a retail building to help those women feature their art and sell their work, but it was important to sustain their visions. And so for that we wanted to see a program that really builds on leadership and entrepreneurial skills."

Started in 2005, EWI's flagship program is a three-month course that provides women with not only network and mentoring connections, but also gives them an understanding of American markets. Topics such as legal aspects of running a business, how to create a blog or website and how to prepare an art proposal for a gallery are all covered. Fripp says she hopes to create a ripple effect with her program. As such, each participant is required to spend eight hours mentoring or training another woman.

"We the People" extends the mission of EWI as it illuminates a

community Fripp feels is isolated.

"I wanted their voices to matter and I wanted them to have a conversation with the American public on what they stand for, what it means to be a woman who's raised under Islam and how we can change some of those stereotypes that we have today," Fripp says.

With support from a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, this year's "We the People" will be a larger event than its two predecessors. Novelists and writers such as Jameela Alter, who will discuss her book "On Clipped Wings," will be present. The organization 20,000 Dialogues, which helps mainstream audiences better understand the Muslim culture, will screen films from 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Like Malik, Alter's book draws from her personal life. Alter grew up in Calcutta, India, before moving to England, Libya



TESS COLWELL/THE GAZETTE

Monica Jahan Bose's "Water 21 (Swept Away)" is part of the "Speak Your Mind: The Art, Stories and Cultures of Arab and Muslim Women" at the Galleries of Takoma Park Community Center. The exhibition is on view through June 25.

and Saudi Arabia and finally settling in the U.S. in 1987.

A Montessori teacher in Bowie, Alter wrote "On Clipped Wings" while on sabbatical beginning in 2000. Published in 2006, the book tells the tale of a beggar girl in Calcutta, who comes from a deadly labor.

"It's called an underground industry, and they main young children and they send them out onto the street, and you feel sorry for them and you give them alms," Alter says.

Despite these hardships, she describes her protagonist as a free spirit.

Alter's book also explores the area's two most popular religions.

"Hopefully, they will understand that in all cultures, there's good and bad people, that the religion I talk about, it's the Hindu and the Muslims, two beau-

tiful religions in their simplicities. When you think about jihad and terrorism, that's again a different aspect, and that's what gives Islam a bad name," Alter says.

An art exhibit also has been created for the event in the Galleries of Takoma Park Community Center. "Speak Your Mind: The Art, Stories and Cultures of Arab and Muslim Women" runs through June 25. The event was curated by Tom Block, a socially conscious Silver Spring artist and author who often works with Fripp's program.

The eight artists featured in the show run the gamut from highly abstract styles to figurative works. Block says the women who created these pieces are equally diverse.

"It's a very good introduction to this world that many of us don't know much about. And I

think one of the most important things is just being open to hearing the voices of people who we don't know very well," he says.

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Empowered Women International "We the People Project 2011: The Lives, Art and Cultures of Muslim and Arab Women" runs from 11 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. on Saturday at the Takoma Park Community Center, 7500 Maple Ave. Admission is free, but an RSVP is required. The exhibition "Speak Your Mind: The Art, Stories and Cultures of Arab and Muslim Women" runs at the Galleries of Takoma Park Community Center through June 25. Rohina Malik's "Unveiled" starts at 6 p.m.; tickets are \$20. Call 301-693-1346 or visit www.ewint.org.