

## A Closer Look: Bianca Bagatourian and Misha Shulman

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Take A Closer Look at [The 2016 Middle East Convening at The Lark!](#) In this series, the playwrights featured at the convening interview each other about their experiences, inspirations, and identities. Read on to see

*what Bianca Bagatourian and Misha Shulman discussed about their work!*

**MISHA SHULMAN: When you write about Armenia, are you primarily writing with Armenians in mind, or a broader public?**

BIANCA BAGATOURIAN: I never write with just an Armenian audience in mind because I have learned that we are such a small demographic, so I tend to aim broader so our stories can be heard on a world stage. We are a tiny minority that doesn't seem to quite fit anywhere! But I don't just write Armenian stories. That would be too limiting. My focus lies more within the human rights/social justice scope and those that try to further it. For example, I was honored to work on the life story of historian, Howard Zinn, who was a proponent of equal rights. And I've been working very closely with genocide oral histories from all over the world.

**MS: How does the Armenian holocaust play into your writing? Does the fact that Turkey is still denying it happened drive you to write about it more, or in a different way?**

BB: You know, it's interesting, as a writer of Armenian heritage, it is almost impossible to ignore the Armenian genocide in my work. And the fact that Turkey is still denying that it happened, pushes it to the front of the mind. So yes, to answer your question, it always inadvertently weaves itself into my writing and probably plays a large role in why my focus is on human rights themes. For The 2016 Middle East America convening at The Lark, I'll be reading from a work I have been working on that looks at genocide through the prism of memory and how it can live on to destroy generation after generation.

**MS: Is your Armenian heritage a driving force behind your running the [human rights playwrighting contest](#)?**

BB: Yes, I am thrilled to be administering a human rights contest through our non-profit, [The Armenian Dramatic Arts Alliance](#). We have been blessed with support from theaters from around the world as the contest has grown over the years. I actually founded the organization to support writers and artists of Armenian heritage, and it grew from there into a global human rights one.

Regarding the contest, it always strikes me as rather interesting, with the state the world is in today, that we don't get ten times as many entries! One

of the great things about being involved with this project is experiencing the variety of stories that come in from all over the world - from India, from China, even from areas where internet access is restricted - and the issues they illuminate, whether on the battlefield, the political arena, in the classroom, or even in the home, and that the stories are so similar, no matter which part of the world they hail from.

**BIANCA BAGATOURIAN: Does all your work revolve around Middle Eastern or Palestinian themes?**

MISHA SHULMAN: Thank God, no. The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is a prism through which I see much of the politics of the world, and which informs a lot of my writing. These days it takes some big, emotional event to drive me to write a play. Sometimes these events are political, like my horrifying trip to Hebron, which led to my last play, *Martyrs Street*. Other times the events are personal, like the birth of my son, which does take on political connotations as well, but within a far wider frame. But the play in which I think I managed to express who I am in a deeper sense than the rest of them, *Brunch at the Luthers*, was about a party in which everybody turns into ducks.

**BB: Would you say your plays are overtly political?**

MS: Many of my plays are, yes. I began my career as what I called an activist playwright. While I refrain from adopting any political position (unless you call equality a political position), I've placed a handful of my plays in pretty clear, familiar situations and places. My first play, *The Fist*, was about an Israeli Officer who refuses to serve in the Occupied Territories. Another, *Desert Sunrise* held the subtitle "Inspired by Ta'ayush: Israeli-Palestinian Partnership for Peace," an Israel NGO. I have also used my plays as platforms for creating dialogue, and deepening the understanding of what is going on in that part of the world. For Theater for the New City's production of *Martyrs Street* last year we brought in experts from around the U.S. and Israel/Palestine for a series of talkbacks. That type of activity, as well as intention around a production, give it what I'd call an overtly political ring.

**BB: I was fascinated to hear about your trip to India and the epic theater you experienced there. Can you talk a little about that?**

MS: Over the last eight years I've gone to South India a few times to watch

a traditional form of Sanskrit Drama called Kudiyatam. The plays last somewhere between nine and 43 nights, and are usually performed almost entirely wordlessly by one actor! After my first 15 day play, back in 2008, I decided to try and write a play that would approximate some of the experience and methodology of the Kudiyatam plays for a Western audience. Kudiyatam plays are religious epics with familiar storylines and characters, so there's not much work to do by way of backstory, and it allows you a ton of room for exploring surprising depths of character. That first play I saw, the Asokavanikangam, was all about the soft side of the ten-headed king of the demons, Ravana - the Ramayan's bad-guy. What I did was take another mythical bad-guy that people are familiar with in the west, the Egyptian Pharaoh in the Jewish exodus story, and tell that story entirely from his perspective. I tried to emulate the Kudiyatam actors' improvisational skills in my writing. I sat down in a huge Hindu temple in South India, prayed to the God for help writing my play, and wrote the first scene there and then in the temple. Believe it or not, I am now in the process of becoming a rabbi, and as my rabbinical project I am working on bringing this play, called *Night of the Broken Eye*, to life. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as it has its genesis in polytheism, the play is intended as a critique of the self-isolating, other-hating aspects of monotheism, and an embrace of an accepting and empowering religion, which sees truth as something to be searched for and shared, not owned and turned to stone.

*An excerpt of this interview appears in the May 2016 edition of Bird's Eye View, The Lark's monthly newsletter. If you want to receive features like this one right to your inbox, [CLICK HERE](#) to sign up for our mailing list!*