

WHO: The Southern Theater and Voices of Sepharad  
WHAT: *Peace in the House*  
WHERE: Southern Theater  
WHEN: Thurs-Sun, Oct. 21-24: Thurs 8pm, Fri 10am, Sat. 8pm, Sun 7pm.  
PRICES: \$20 general admission; \$2 discount students, seniors, Southern members;  
\$10 group rate (10 or more); Fri matinee sliding scale \$5-20  
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## NEWS RELEASE

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### Centuries-old Muslim, Jewish and Christian Neighborliness at Home in *Peace in the House*

Theatre, music and dance performance explores rich history of coexistence

MINNEAPOLIS, MN (May 20, 2004)—Taking the long view of history in the Middle East and North Africa, David Harris, artistic director of Voices of Sepharad, is intent on showing us that the many cultural and religious groups who have shared this region for thousands of years do in fact possess a long tradition of being good neighbors.

In response to the strife that presently racks the region—in large part due to religious fundamentalism and cultural intolerance—and the relentlessly bleak depiction presented by the media, Harris's new work, *Peace in the House*, strives to portray these groups on more a personal, human scale. "We think in very negative terms these days of the inter-personal relationships of those living in the Middle East because it's become such a flash point for violence and hatred," says Harris. "But historically, many people of different faiths have lived together peacefully and intimately came to know each other's way of life."

Working with an ensemble of actors, dancers, musicians and production team that reflect these various cultures, Harris is walking the talk when it comes to initiating a dialogue. "This production will not just talk about intercultural dialogue, we'll be living it," says Harris. "Every person in the show represents some aspect of these cultures and will be empowered to bring their voices forward in the show's creation."

Guest artists who will collaborate on the project include Algerian-born choreographer Amel Tafsout, Saudi visual artist Hend Al-Mansour, Egyptian musician Salah Abdel Fattah, and a corps of six dancer-actors whose backgrounds encompass Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in ancestral homes ranging from North Africa and Jordan, to Turkey, Lebanon, and Iran.

The underlying premise for *Peace in the House* contends that Sephardic Jews, following their expulsion from Spain in 1492, lived in the context of the Arab world for hundreds of years and that this complex relationship was principally defined by neighborliness. Music, poetry, dance, folktale and lore bound the cultures together in a mosaic of shared expression—as significant to their history as their political contentions.

“There are all kinds of customs in Jewish life in which non-Jewish neighbors played an essential role,” Harris continues. “For instance, at the end of Passover in Morocco, Muslim neighbors would bring the first loaves of leavened bread back into the community because, of course, no Jew would have had any for eight days.”

The creation of *Peace in the House* follows Harris’s 2001 production of *Tales of Djoha: Trickster in Two Worlds*, a work that wove together music, dance and theater with a touching, often humorous look at a folkloric figure, Djoha, shared by Arabic and Jewish communities throughout North Africa, the Balkans, and Eastern Mediterranean lands. The production showcased a musical repertoire from Israel, Morocco and Turkey sung in the Judeo-Spanish folk dialect. After its premiere in Minneapolis, it toured the Midwest with funding from the Luce and Rockefeller Foundations.

“The view put forth in *Peace in the House* is not well known or understood by the American public,” Harris says, “which has been relentlessly fed images by the media of eternal combativeness. *Voices of Sepharad* seeks to present a historically based, imaginatively conceived work of theater which presents alternative imagery to what we see all too often.”

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## Q&A with David Harris, artistic director of Voices of Sepharad and creator of *Peace in the House*

**Q:** In your last show, *Tales of Djoha*, you explored a folkloric character shared by both Arab and Jewish cultures. How has this show been influenced by that one?

**A:** *Peace in the House* is the spiritual sequel to *Tales of Djoha: Trickster in Two Worlds*. It springs from the same impulse. I want to show how Jews and Muslims have lived together in peace and neighborliness in a region most often known for hatred and violence. It's part of the historical record.

**Q:** How do you do this?

**A:** *Peace in the House* is more than just an evening of theater. It creates a forum for dialogue. I've cast artists who were born in this region of the world or who are connected to it through ancestry. I'm not looking to impose my views and make other people enact them. I want to integrate the point of view of the performers and my artistic collaborators, visual artist Hend Al-Mansour, and choreographer Amel Tafsout. *Peace in the House* is not meant to reference Judeo-Muslim culture. It's meant to *be* the culture.

**Q:** From where do you draw the material?

**A:** There are so many little-known traditions that weave these cultures together--the musical vocabulary, folktale, visual taste. It's not a world in which sharp delineations separated people into ghettos. Jews and Arabs often lived in the same neighborhoods, shared the same courtyard. I'm trying to present an embracing landscape so that an audience can conceive of these relationships in less destructive ways. Sure, conflict is one of the stories these people share, but it's not the only one.

**Q:** That's certainly not what the media show us.

**A:** Of course not. So the motivation for this piece is to create the terms for the dialogue and then to actually have the dialogue. I also look at this production as an opportunity for individuals who don't have many opportunities artistically to make work that comes out of their backgrounds. The response has been phenomenal.

**Q:** How have you gone about casting?

**A:** I tried to cast a really wide net--a wide range of ages and artistic talents. Some of the artists are new to me. Others, such as violinist Salah Abdel Fattah, have worked with Voices of Sepharad in the past. Everyone's excited. What often happens when people grow up in the West is there's a divide from the cultures that gave birth to who they are. The West has a way of separating people from their backgrounds. To put it pleasantly, it's called assimilation. To put it unpleasantly, there's a sense of superiority about Western artistic tradition in this culture. So why would you want to be connecting with a non-Northern European background? The answer is that our history feeds us.

**Q:** How will you know if the show is a success?

**A:** There aren't too many opportunities these days for Jews and Arabs to come together around something they have in common: a common experience that makes for an occasion. So why is this an occasion worth paying attention to? Because the rest of our lives are filled with occasions not to think about: 9/11, Shiite militias and bombers in Madrid—those things that blow our world apart. I'm looking for occasions that hold our world together.

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