



foolsFURY Theater Presents:
(Dis)Place[d]

“Luminous...So beautifully written, performed and directed that you might wish it were longer.” (*SF Examiner*)

(DIS)PLACE[D] is a new solo work by creator/performer Debórah Eliezer and director Ben Yalom. In it Eliezer traces her own roots through the story of her father, Edward Ben-Eliezer, an Iraqi Jew born in 1930, member of the Zionist underground, refugee, Israeli spy, and immigrant to America.

Eliezer brings twenty years’ experience as an acclaimed physical performer to create a dozen different characters, including her father at three different ages, her great grandmother, their Iraqi neighbors, an ethereal embodiment of the Tigris Euphrates valley itself, refugees, immigrants, and more. Beyond the purely personal, the play reveals the tenuous position of Arab Jews in America and elsewhere: many *Mizrahi* (Middle Eastern) Jews feel their heritage has been erased in efforts assimilate to their new homes, where *Ashkenazi* (European) Jewish culture is given priority.

First generation immigrants have often hidden the stories of their past, sometimes to keep painful memories from their children, sometimes to enthusiastically embrace their new countries. The children are caught between cultures, with no way of expressing or even acknowledging a multi-national, multi-ethnic identity. It was not until Eliezer’s father had begun his descent into dementia that she began to glimpse his past.

“We kept cyanide in our socks,” he said out of the blue one day. And she learned that her peace-loving father had been a spy for the Israeli Defense Forces. Other stories trickled out:

- as a child he hid for days on a rooftop as Baghdadi Jews were slaughtered during the Farhoud, a Nazi-inspired “pogrom”;
- at 11 he joined the Zionist underground, smuggling weapons;
- at 19 he was targeted for assassination, fled Baghdad, crossed the desert on foot, and lived in a refugee camp on the Iraq/Iran border for two years;
- he managed to bring 8 of his 9 siblings to Israel, unable to save the eldest, who stayed behind and was killed.

Bit by bit Debórah uncovered her roots, and the remarkable history of the Iraqi Jewish Diaspora. Remarkable because Jews had been deeply integrated into Iraqi life for over 2500 years, and made up a third of Baghdad's population in 1940. And because, within a decade, all 130,000 were gone, expelled, escaped, or killed. Today fewer than 10 Jews remain in Iraq.

(DIS)PLACE[D] follows Eliezer's exploration of these stories, and asks hard questions: Who has the right to tell the story of a people? What is the significance of borders versus land and culture? What is the relationship of nationality to identity? The work aims to open a space for community dialogue around these issues in general, and specifically within the diaspora of Mizrahi Jews. Through this journey, the artist also finds a missing part of herself, "a song sung in a language I can't understand" as she puts it. "A dream I can't remember."

The mission of foolsFURY Theater Company is to revitalize the American theater by:

- Creating ground-breaking visceral performances that inspire audiences and artists to reconsider and reconnect with the world around them,
- Emphasizing qualities of the theater that can only be experienced live, and
- Advancing artistic dialogue and community through accessible training, research, and presentation.

FoolsFURY has been named the city's "Best Theater Company" (2008) by the *San Francisco Weekly* and was awarded the *SF Bay Guardian's* GOLDIE award (2007) for outstanding local theater group. We create acclaimed theater productions, including numerous world and West Coast premieres, as well as deconstructed classics. Our recent productions include the world premiere of Sheila Callaghan's *Port Out, Starboard Home*, the world premier of *Monster in The Dark*, our collaboration with best-selling novelist Doug Dorst, the US premiere of Fabrice Melquiot's *The Devil on All Sides*, and many more.

FoolsFURY serves as a hub for a vibrant community of theater artists, producing the FURY Factory festival of ensemble theater every other year. The festival has become one of San Francisco's most exciting cultural events, an accessible home for audiences and artists to experience compelling new works by risk-taking theater-makers. It provides opportunities for dozens of local artists to expand their creative bounds.

(Dis)Place[d] is now available for touring.

Please contact Artistic Director Ben Yalom for information, at ben@foolsfury.org, or (415) 377-5277.



Evocative solo performance explores history, identity

By Jean Schiffman
Special to S.F. Examiner

Debórah Eliezer's metatheatrical, autobiographical performance piece “(dis)Place[d]” — part of a foolsFURY Theater double bill of unrelated solo shows under the umbrella title “Role Call,” directed by Ben Yalom — is so beautifully written, performed and directed that you might wish it were longer than its 40 or so minutes.

In it, Eliezer, who has a stage presence that's both assured and endearingly vulnerable, explores her own lineage as the daughter of a Jewish-Iraqi father whose family had lived in Baghdad for 200 years — until World War II and the establishment of the state of Israel, when Jews were forced to flee Iraq en masse.

“Abba,” as Eliezer calls him, walked across the desert to Iran, eventually reaching Israel and then America.

Once home to 130,000 Jews, Iraq now has virtually none.

Eliezer gracefully interweaves her father's story with her own longing to learn the long-held secrets of his life and thus to better understand her own identity.

“Your past is on a need-to-know basis,” she tells him. “Well, I need to know.” And later: “Each part of knowing you . . . complicates me.”

She also depicts, with wry humor, her effort to get at the heart of the very play she's creating right now.

Along the way she inhabits several characters.

They include, most importantly, Abba at various stages of his life: old, with some dementia, in a wheelchair at a nursing home, and as both teenager in Baghdad and a younger man, always charming and somewhat mysterious.

She also plays Abba's Iraqi grandmother, trying to protect him from anti-Jewish violence, and herself — as both narrator and loving daughter.

She sings haunting, presumably

Mizrachi (Jewish Middle Eastern) songs and prayers that send chills up your spine and embodies, with exquisite, dancerly physicality and vocal power (and clothed in a gossamer, enveloping cape), non-human entities such as the land itself.

She tries to explain, to recorded voiceovers of judgmental dinner guests, exactly what “(dis)Place[d]” is meant to be about.

An upstage screen projects black-and-white images of a long-ago, long-lost Baghdad.

Eliezer is an expressive actor, and her story, lyrical and affecting, is one you've probably never heard before.

Unfortunately, the evening begins with Michelle Haner's “Sheryl, Hamlet, and Me,” which is as convoluted and self-indulgent as the title suggests. Didactic and too long, it's also awkwardly performed.

Yalom's efforts to link the two pieces, via abstract movement, don't help.



COURTESY WENDY YALOM

Debórah Eliezer is excellent in “(dis)Place[d],” part of foolsFURY Theater's “Role Call.”

REVIEW: Role Call

Presented by foolsFURY Theater

Where: Noh Space, 2840 Mariposa St., S.F.

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays; closes Oct. 22

Tickets: \$15 to \$30 **Contact:** www.foolsfury.org

***(dis)Place[d]* Audience Engagement Companion Activities**

Each of these activities are adaptable for age, accessibility, duration or space.

Programs designed to accompany the play [*\(dis\)Place\[d\]*](#)

What Do I Claim?: an interdisciplinary lobby display for wayfinding

This is a curated program for young/early-career interdisciplinary artists. Working with foolsFURY and the host theater prior to presentation of *(dis)Place[d]*, we create a lobby display. Through art installation, video, pictures, symbols/objects, poetry, and short autobiographical writing, participants will express their relationship to claiming identity.

Requires preparation prior to the performance, discussions and some curatorial collaboration between organizations. A map (a repeated theme in *(dis)Place[d]*) may be employed as a guiding theme. *Suitable for 1-10 participants*

Write Your Life: a writer's workshop

Each of us has a story to tell. How do we share it? Explore your unique identity through writing, partner sharing, and spontaneous writing prompts with other folks your age to unlock inspiration. Learn how Debórah and foolsFURY created this show. Share your love of arts and/or explore something for the very first time in a safe space. *1.5 to 3 hours, suitable for 6-60 participants*

Claiming Your American Narrative: working with story circles

How do we change our perception of who can tell an American story? One story at a time. Build bridges with other folks in your community by listening and sharing. Guided by Debórah, participants sit in small group circles and are given prompts to tell an uninterrupted short, personal story. Prompts are community-specific, fun, and designed to inspire creativity, build empathy, and have fun. *45 mins to 2 hours, suitable for 5-60 participants*

The Tea Salon: a delicious space for reflection

Arab culture has a long history of drinking tea and discussing, arguing, debating, commiserating, and laughing over the issues of the day. In this casual interaction, foolsFURY invites participants to sit on pillows and benches in small groups, partake of tea and sweets, and relax. Via small slips of paper, questions are asked of fellow participants to inspire dialogue about cultural identity. This activity often follows the show itself and may or may not include an invited guest speaker. *30-45 minutes*