

All We Are and All We Could Be

An essay reflecting on and responding to a consultation with Middle Eastern, North African, and South Asian (MENASA) theatre and performance artists in Toronto and Montreal.

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Introduction

In March of 2022, Heather Caplap, Education and Community Engagement Manager of Tarragon Theatre, Fatma Sarah Elkashef, Artistic Director of Playwrights' Workshop Montréal (PWM), Leila Ghaemi, Artistic Producer of Playwrights' Workshop Montréal, Michael Payette, Artistic Director of Tarragon Theatre, Rouvan Silogix, Artistic Director of Modern Times Theatre, and myself, Makram Ayache, an independent theatre artist, convened for a meeting to address the lack of meaningful representation, advocacy, and artistic inclusion of Middle Eastern, North African, and South Asian (MENASA) artists in theatre.

One topic within that first meeting, and a recurring pattern in all subsequent meetings, was the discussion of the term MENASA itself. Often, it is critiqued for its root stemming out of a Western lens, as opposed to the communities determining their naming themselves, specifically the term “Middle East.” We considered an alternative term, currently more championed by contemporary social justice advocates: SWANA, which stands for “Southwest Asian and North African.” However, in the context of our gatherings, this term didn’t encompass South Asians, who we felt were integral to this conversation, including Pakistanis, Afghanis, and other groups who weren’t included in the SWANA acronym alone.

As the initiative’s organizing committee, we provisionally settled on MENASA as a placeholder title while we organized these conversations. What was born out of these meetings became what we called the “MENASA Initiative.” We organized gatherings of MENASA theatre and performance artists in Montreal and Toronto for a two-day consultation workshop in each city. This essay is our endeavour to capture, reflect, and respond to the consultations.

In some ways, the term MENASA orients the entire conversation. Who is included? On what basis? Who is excluded? Why? The Middle Eastern, North African, and South Asian lands are massive – the cultures are pluralistic, the ethnicities and races are far ranging, the languages just as vast. The religious makeup is diverse, the political alignments just as multifaceted, and the landscape and geography much more dynamic than the entire continent of North America. So, how does this vast and multivariable community come together under one limited umbrella? In what context? Can we?

During the consultation workshops, the participants teased “we all have kabobs,” though that’s not quite true, or “we all get an extra pat down at the airport,” also not always true, or “we’re all brown,” which is also not at all true. “We’re all culturally Muslim,” also not true. “We’ve all experienced Western imperialism upon our lands,” perhaps closer to the truth, but how does that differentiate us from Black, Asian, and African communities’ experiences of Western imperialism?

So, what is it that uniquely brings us together? This question brought forth more and more questions, questions we wrestled with over six days across two cities.

What’s undeniable is that there is a pernicious anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, anti-Brown, and anti-MENASA antagonism in the Western world. The “clash of civilizations” lives in the collective imagination of the Canadian identity, and the West pits itself in an ongoing struggle against the ideas, concepts, and people coming from these parts of the world. I find myself resisting the use of the word “region” because it is such a politicized and dehumanized way to describe communities made up of living, breathing, dynamic, and ever-changing people.

We are often relegated to “geopolitical regions” which sound like a cold and distant land, an enemy, which we must always be strategizing against. Complexly, I use “we” twice in two different ways in the previous sentence, one to describe myself as part of the geopolitical region being observed by the West, and another, as a westerner (an Arab in Canada) observing the distant lands. This, too, is a rich and integral part of the conversations that took place over the consultation period.

In this essay, I want to discuss the process we undertook and many of the findings that surfaced. I also, transparently, will not attempt to be an impartial bystander, simply reporting on the findings. I’m a queer Lebanese settler in Canada and will situate myself as such in this conversation and throughout the essay. I share this so as to not mislead any reader; I want you to know what you’re reading, how it’s being represented. I hope you are inspired to come to new questions and conclusions that help us continue in our missions toward more equitable and justice-oriented futures. You may disagree with me throughout this essay, you may find my own reflections contradict things that came up through the participants, and all of that is okay. I ultimately hope, and what we as the organizing committee on the MENASA Initiative hope, is that this becomes a springboard to a conversation that is in dire and desperate need within the theatre community. Now, more than ever.

Thank you for being a part of this conversation.

Process

I want to begin by sharing an overview of the process we undertook together during the consultation and organizing days across two cities, culminating in this essay.

Preliminary Meetings

The organizing committee met in March 2023 to discuss what emergent concerns are emanating out of Middle Eastern, North African, and South Asian theatre and performance communities. We each came with our own understandings and perspectives, many of us from MENASA communities ourselves. Through our conversations, we decided that the most important preliminary step was a robust community consultation.

PWM took the lead on securing funding for the initiative through a Canada Council for the Arts Seed Grant, with support from Tarragon Theatre, Modern Times Theatre, and myself. This grant would allow us to host two gathering weekends, one in Montreal and the second in Toronto. Each gathering weekend allowed us to hold a 2-day consultation with a selected group of 10-15 MENASA performance and theatre artists, as well as 1 day with the organizing committee to debrief and plan next stages.

Preparation for Consultations

We began organizing the consultations by creating a list of potential participants. I led the participant list creation in Toronto with Michael Payette, and Rouvan Silogix provided additional names and supported in the creation of the final list of participants. Leila Ghaemi and Fatma Sarah Elkashef led the list creation and final list of participants in Montreal. The full organizing committee contributed suggestions to both lists across cities.

We took great care to consider the participants we would invite. We were interested in capturing gender, ethnic, religious, ability, age and cultural diversity, while recognizing the limitations of our consultation. We focused on independent artists, and not specifically artistic directors or leaders, although those boundaries were porous for many of the participants. We knew our consultations alone would not be able to capture the breadth of people this work reflects and impacts, but needed to start the conversation somewhere. We chose to keep the participants' names private for this essay to ensure comfort and transparency throughout the consultations. We recognize that the results may have differed with different participants on a different day. The work we are endeavouring to do cannot reflect a monolithic conversation, it will be ongoing and ever evolving.

Once we confirmed the artists that would participate, we asked an arts-based facilitator in Montreal, to lead both the Montreal and the Toronto workshops. She led an open model of facilitation which invited participants to determine what the events, explorations, questions, and curiosities were that emanated from the consultation. It was important that we worked with a facilitator who was not in the theatre and performance arts industry and did not have personal artistic stakes in the conversations. We felt this would ensure the most transparency from the participants. With a facilitator cemented, we embarked on our consultations.

Montreal Consultation

The Montreal Consultation took place first, from March 15 to 16, 2024 at Playwrights' Workshop Montréal's Studio. The group was made up of artists who, for the most part, did not have prior

relationships with one another, despite working in related fields (theatre, dance, and film). This was later identified as being due to tokenization. Much of the first day was spent building trust, understanding, and a collective vision for what the consultation meant. I will discuss in more detail in the following sections what arose throughout the consultation. But some emergent characteristics of the Montreal conversations was that people were excited to meet others who came from similar experiences. There was a great deal of discussion around what brings a group such as this together, what unifies, what separates, and what the possibilities and limitations were of this gathering. One thing that is important to note about the Montreal consultation is that the organizing committee sat around the edges of the room quietly observing, but we quickly learned that our presence needed to be addressed directly and clearly. This experience and the adjustment that followed in the Toronto conversation is explored in the discussions below. The Montreal consultation concluded with a sense of excitement for a new network of artists and a hopeful vision of future steps of the initiative.

Between Consultations

After the Montreal consultation concluded, the organizing committee met to discuss adjustments we wished to make to the consultation structure in preparation for the Toronto gathering. Further, led by Michael Payette and Fatma Sarah Elkashef, we were able to address the need to identify right from the beginning who the organizing committee is, why we were observing the consultations, and what we aimed to do with these consultations. We also planned for an adjustment to the structure, which allowed for more free flowing conversation and personal reflections by the participants.

Toronto Consultation

From April 4 to 6, 2024, the Toronto consultation took place at Tarragon Theatre's Rehearsal Hall. Unlike the Montreal consultation, the participants in Toronto had a preexisting familiarity with one another. They came into the consultation like old friends, and there was a palpable political energy rooted in the Palestinian Struggle and its relationship to the Toronto arts community. I'll explore this in more detail in the discussions below. The adjustments to the facilitation of the consultation workshop allowed an easier settling-in right from the beginning. We were introduced as the organizing committee and situated ourselves in the conversation, partly as institutional organizations and partly as MENASA and allied artists ourselves, with our own admitted biases. Similarly to Montreal, the Toronto consultation concluded with a sense of excitement and a hopeful vision to future organizing.

Final Meeting

After the Toronto Consultation concluded, the organizing committee had a final meeting strategizing the next steps. We outlined our goals: to implement these conversations at a national level, build a network that will support one another, and create a foundation for systemic changes in the future.

The Essay

After the consultations were complete, I was given time to coalesce my notes taken during the meetings into this essay. My first draft was reviewed by the organizing committee where a subsequent second draft was generated. From there, another set of reviews by the organizing committee took place, where a third draft was written. The third draft was sent to all participants for quote approval, prior to the fourth and final draft.

Creating Trust

Institutional aims and independent artists

“Why are we here? What do we hope to get today? And who are we doing this for?”

Within the second hour of our first day, a participant in Montreal asked these incisive questions in a tone of curiosity, and suspicion. We looked around the room: we had people that came from a small representation of the many groups that make up the MENASA world. All were part of the theatre, dance, film, and performing arts industry, most were independent and freelance artists. Some were newcomers, others were immigrants, and others had been here for many generations.

The cautiousness and directness in the tone of the participant was telling. We are a complex group, one that’s faced a lot of dereliction, and even worse, one that’s made to be an “enemy.” Naturally, our guards were up. *Why are we here? What do we hope to get today? And who are we doing this for?* These are extremely logical questions.

The facilitator used an embodied, participant-curiosities approach to facilitate the workshops. The activities included movement, talking, writing, brainstorming, fantasizing, and playing. All of this was done inside the circle, where the 15 participants sat, while the organizing team sat on the edges of the room taking notes.

The suspicion aroused in the questions above might have been prompted by the configuration of the room. A circle of independent theatre and performance artists being observed by theatre leaders, and myself as a notetaker, certainly demands questions.

Many of the participants asked us to join the circle. We waffled. We already knew how we felt, so there was hesitancy in joining the discussions and possibly swaying other opinions. Sometimes we observed, sometimes we joined. The parameters became porous and even more porous during our second consultation in Toronto. We recognized that most members of the organizing committee hold institutional privilege and are thus granted a certain power, and responsibility, over the participating artists. But being members of the eclectic makeup of the MENASA communities also meant having personal stakes in the conversations. When it became abundantly clear who we were, we wanted to articulate the intentions of the initiative. In truth, our aims were intentionally lofty. We wanted to gather information, strategize the best plan of action that would have lasting and meaningful change. In the simplest terms, these consultations provided us an opportunity to listen. With professional facilitation, we approached the topics that surfaced from the participants.

But the question remained, *“who are we doing this for?”* The participants wanted to ensure they didn’t cross off a checkmark or become an exploited think tank for something that wasn’t in true service to the communities most impacted by this work. Was this another vapid opportunity for theatre companies to defuse the tensions of racial harm by providing a hollow consultation? Or was this a real chance to build something sustainable and transformative? After a robust and lengthy conversation about how the organizing team was oriented in this conversation, and my participation as an organizer and consultation essayist, tensions eased. There was a melting in the air and we understood that the divide between institution and individual, especially individuals from a marginalized community, was a necessary thing to acknowledge, but that trust was possible, good faith was possible, and action together was possible.

From that point, we began our conversations more intentionally. And when we had our second consultation in Toronto, we began with this orientation of institutions, which allowed us to ease readily into the work.

From the consultations in both cities, I've narrowed down four common topics which surfaced.

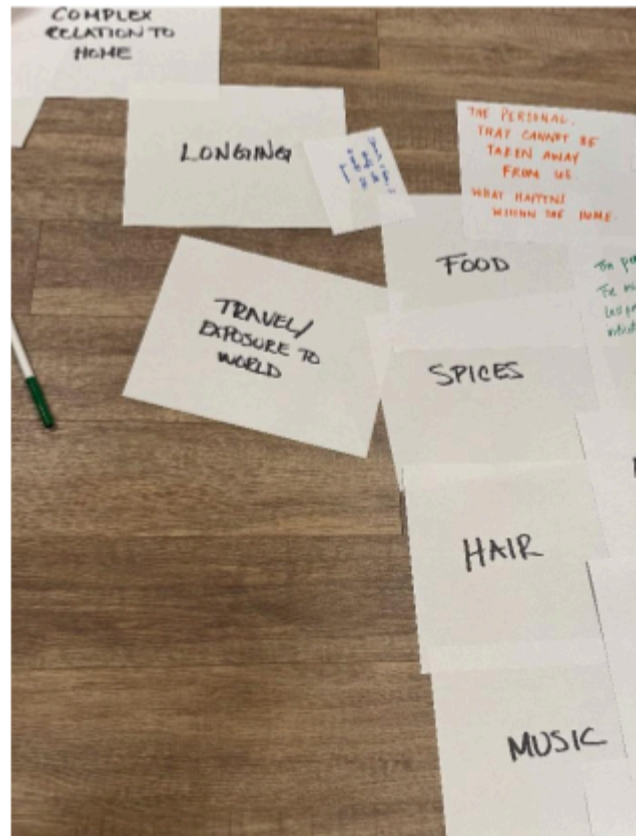
- (1) Connections and Disconnections – Making sense of identity and experiences.
- (2) From the Outside Looking In – How racism, oppressive systems, and attitudinal misrepresentations in the arts cause harm.
- (3) The Palestinian Struggle – Reflecting on this acute and enduring moment of pain.
- (4) Possible Futures – Ideas, strategies, and advocacy for future building.

Connections and Disconnections

Making sense of Identity and Experiences

In both cities, the participants began with an introduction of themselves tied to a specific object. The objects ranged from a tape cassette which had recordings of family from back in Lebanon to a small trinket box gifted to someone by their Algerian grandmother. Another participant brought in a plushie that reminded them of their inner child, and others brought forward books from Beirut, or rings from Pakistan, or their Canadian Passport, which they'd overcome so much to attain. The threads of connectivity began to surface through this activity and beyond the ornamentations of identity. What really brought this group together was a feeling of otherness, a longing for a home that was gone, and an instability in truly taking root in North America.

We come from lands ravaged by Western imperialism, and we come to a land colonized by Western imperialism. It's hard not to find our common unity amongst this bleak truth. But there was something more. As we turned towards activities that asked participants to share what brought them together, other commonalities surfaced. The photos below share a representation of the ways participants reflected their unifying qualities. Food, spices, hair, music, longing, travel, complex relationships to home, old rich histories, common values, community, and questioning identity are some of the qualities that surfaced.



Participants reflect on their “unifying” qualities

As participants continued to explore the connective tissue between one another, we inevitably turned our attention to the term MENASA. As mentioned, the term is contentious, specifically the identity moniker of “Middle East.” Middle East of what? Members of the group in Toronto found the term SWANA, “a more appropriate term that encompasses the land geographically,” positing, “Southwest Asia and North African” or “Levant Region” to be more inclusive. Others said, “I just don’t like general terms,” and others expressed, “we are not a monolith.” Someone asked, “who made this acronym and why is it easier to group like this?” Yet, in the third image below, you’ll notice someone writes “I don’t mind the term.”

During the discussion, a participant who recently immigrated to Canada shared that they were surprised by the term MENASA upon their invitation to this consultation. They said, “I didn’t know I was part of that umbrella.” Perhaps it is in a North American context that the term MENASA has been adopted, or perhaps it is because the term is less often used than more specific terms like Arab, Turkish, South Asian, or Iranian. MENASA was new to many in our gatherings. The complexity of its use might also be because it is a riff off of a pre-existing term, MENA, and in our attempt to include South Asian participants, we settled on the less familiar but expanded MENASA. But the term MENA itself isn’t particularly popularly widespread, and it doesn’t skirt the imperialistic lens of “Middle East.” So where does this all land? Because, while participants were unclear about which terms best encapsulate who they are as a unified whole, they also expressed an appreciation for the rarity of this opportunity that brought them together



Participants reflect on the term MENASA

So who are these artists? What kind are we? We began thinking, what makes us distinctive from one another, and why is that important? All of this is in pursuit of creating connections, bridging experiences, and linking solidarity and unity. I began thinking about MENASA with suspicion myself, but I liked its utility – at the very least it brought together a room of Middle Eastern, North African, and South Asian artists. And we recognized something in each other. I considered the term “Brown,” but I worry about that because MENASA people are brown, black, and white.

Ultimately, it felt like what was orienting these meetings was a “Canadian context.” We can’t encapsulate everything, and it will not be perfect, but we should strive toward responding to a Canadian context. Indigeneity, Blackness, the Gaza conversation, anti-Arab, anti-Brown, anti-Islamic racism, and Antisemitism in North America and Canadian society – these are necessary ingredients to this conversation and perhaps our future plans can integrate this clarity.

In Montreal, the participants compiled a group of “shared experiences” and the facilitator took a ‘by-show-of-hands’ survey in the room as folks responded. Here are the results:

- o RESILIENCE: Many answered yes.
- o HAIR: Majority yes.
- o LOVE FOR SUN: All yes.
- o MUSIC: Yes.
- o FOOD: Yes.
- o LONGING: Mixed.
- o SEARCHING: Not many.
- o LIGHTNESS: Not many.
- o HUMOUR: Majority
- o CREATION: Not many
- o OUT OF THE BOX: 1 person.
- o BEING SUSPICIOUS: Some – not majority.
- o EMPATHY/APPRECIATION OF PARALLEL EXPERIENCES: Majority.
- o GREAT FOOD: Majority.
- o SPICES: Sort of.
- o REMEMBRANCE: Sort of – not majority
- o GRANDMOTHER: Not many.
- o THE QUESTIONINGS OF IDENTITY: All/majority
- o VIOLENCE/WAR/CONQUERING: Majority.
- o COLLECTIVE: Mix – not many
- o HYPERVIGILANCE: Majority – almost all.
- o BEING TOKENIZED: Majority.
- o OUR LOVE FOR WARMTH: Yes.
- o TRAVEL/EXPOSURE TO THE WORLD: Mixed – half.

I add to this list that some of the key characteristics that bring our communities together are family responsibility and commitment, intergenerational inheritance and rooted connection, shared land and geography, the Muslim faith/cultures (whether culturally, spiritually, or traditionally – whether one is Muslim or not), the Abrahamic faiths/cultures (although not always), Arabic language as a dominating language of conquest, and shared history of the culture and land that intersects with language and faith.

Ultimately, there wasn’t a settling of this question of identity and experiences. We are a pluralistic and dynamic group, we are multiethnic, multinational, multiracial, and multireligious. We are connected through some tendrils that are as permanent as land and others that are as ephemeral as “longing”. At some point in the consultations, we came to realize that we all come from the global majority. However, within a Canadianized context, even amongst the vastness of our ethnocultural identities,

we still make up a small population of the citizenry, and an even smaller slice of the performing arts sector. What word best reflects who we are, and why is the terminology so important? Is it better if we simply state where we're from? I'm a Lebanese Canadian artist. Does that situate me better than being a MENASA artist? What is the connective tissue between a Lebanese artist, an Iranian artist, and a Pakistani artist? Is it as disparate as the connective tissue of a Nigerian artist, a Moroccan artist, and a Black American artist from New York? Is it as diverse as a Chinese, Filipinx, and Tibetan artist? Yes, yes and yes; just as diverse, just as interconnected.

Shaping identity feels like drawing concentric circles. We determine where we best fit and perhaps, we're lovingly embraced and secured by the circle that encircles our inner circle, and on and on and on. I look at the images snapped above and someone says "let's just be "humans." When your identity is defined by *you*, and not by someone who exerts power over you, then all rivers do lead to this notion of "let's just be humans." Given the stereotypes we are constantly pushed into, this becomes a radical notion.

Ultimately, our attention shifted through this need for a shared identity and towards a grappling with the shared harms that are perpetrated towards us. We will explore those discoveries in the next section.

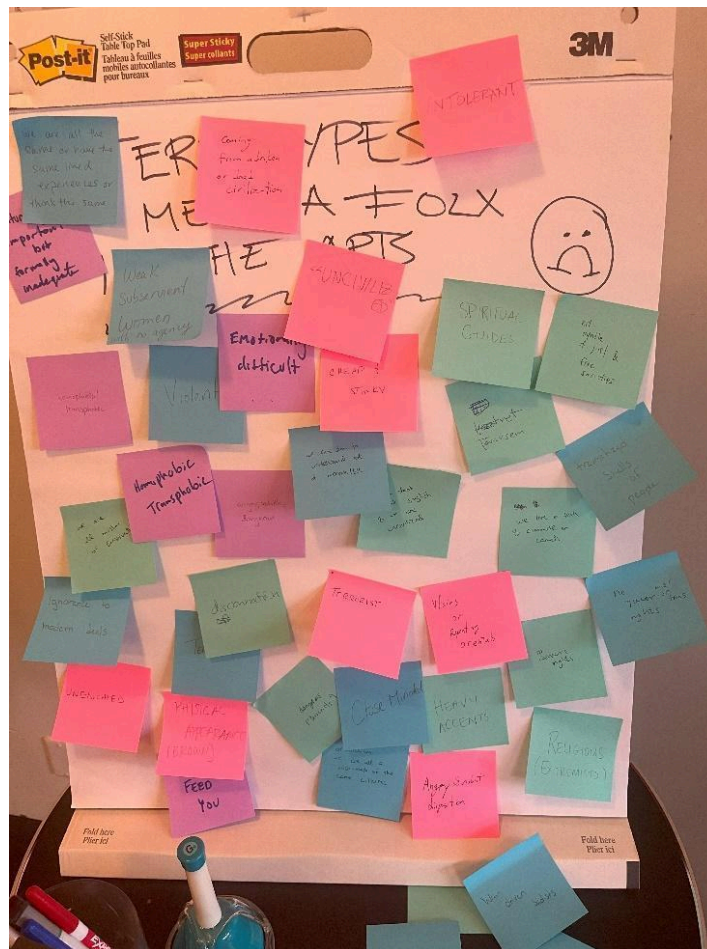
From the Outside Looking In

How racism, oppressive systems, and attitudinal misrepresentations cause harm

It's ironic that it was easier to find unity in our shared marginalization and oppressions than anything else. As mentioned at the beginning of the last section, we are all people who come from lands ravished by Western Imperialism, and we come to a land that is dominated by the same Western Imperial lineages. This is a bleak truth but a certain one, and perhaps, our most unifying factor.

Participants were given an opportunity to articulate some of the harmful ways racism and oppressive systems work against MENASA artists in the theatre and performing arts industry. Some of the ways are concrete and easy to identify, while others are more ephemeral and attitudinal. This section parses through these findings.

In Toronto, participants were asked to write down some of the “stereotypes” they find set against them. Some of the representations that arose include: weak subservient women, coming from a broken or dead civilization, intolerant, uncivilized, we live in tents and commute on camels, not capable of just and free societies, cheap and stinky, religious extremists, homophobic/transphobic, angry, villainous, violent, and so on.



Activity on stereotypes with post-it notes.

I think of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in which he redefined how the pan-Asian world was viewed by the Western world as a backward and inferior society in need of civilizing and containing. Said expands on this idea in his subsequent books, *The Question of Palestine* and *Covering Islam*, in which he recognizes that it is in the Western world's interest to perpetuate the misrepresentation of this "foreign threat." This justifies the ongoing conflict, legitimizing military intervention because of an orientalist analysis of the Asian and North African world.

So, it is no surprise to me that the consultation participants identified stereotypes like terrorists, uncivilized, subjugators of women, domestic abusers, homo/transphobic cultures, regressive, and incapable of free societies. The Western world, through a democratic, liberal perspective, or a conservative, nationalist perspective, must continually justify its white supremacy.

While the liberal/conservative divide may have different values for the caretaking of its citizenry, both maintain a consistent foreign policy based on military might and supremacy. And unlike the direct domination of Black and Indigenous people, Western Imperialism, with a U.S. locus of power, must keep its citizenry in duress from the impending and dangerous 'clash of civilizations,' with a particular vitriol towards the Muslim world. The immeasurable irony of it all is that the USA and its affiliates, including Canada, have been the primary instigators of war, domination, and supremacy since WWII – ranging from the war on Vietnam, the US backed coup of Chile, the implementation and then annihilation of Muslim leaders including Sadam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden, the "War on Terror," and right up to the Western world's complicity and participation in the ongoing genocide against the Palestinian people.

How is this tied to our theatre landscape? The collective Canadian imagination is not immune to perpetuating these stereotypes. Even when artistic leaders and liberal audiences welcome a story from MENASA artists, there is a strange and sublime expectation of reckoning with war, terror, displacement, refugees, etc.. These productions are primarily led by creative teams outside of the MENASA community. Why is it that the Canadian arts industry doesn't have a coming of age dramedy set in an all-girls school in Jordan, like Netflix's *Ranabi*? Sure, it wouldn't need to take place in Jordan, but certainly there are plenty of MENASA majority schools in Canada. We could have stories of Arab, Muslim, Amazigh, North African, Iranian, Pakistani, Afghani, and other MENASA experiences that do not center the Western lens. Stories of coming of age, love, romance, magic, spirituality, family, friendship, overcoming heartbreak, and any other kind can be a part of the collective imagination that makes up the plurality of MENASA experiences.

In Montreal, participants were asked to fill out their reflections on three sections (Us, Community, Exterior) pictured below.

1. Lack of MENASA representation on and off stages.
2. Exclusion and erasure of MENASA artists and stories throughout performing arts history.
3. Harmful Stereotypes and/or Microaggressions when MENASA stories/perspectives are depicted.
4. Many cultures/cultural differences that fall under the term MENASA + How each culture requires/deserves its own representation.

These are some of the notes reflecting the conversations that arose through the debriefing of this activity.

1. Lack of MENASA representation on and off stage
 - a. “We start to think – who’s hiring? Who has decision making and power.”
 - b. “There is an evident lack of MENASA representation on and off stage.”
 - c. “How do we [advocate for ourselves] without censoring ourselves?”
 - d. People feel driven to do more work, more explorations, and more entries into MENASA representation.
2. Exclusion and erasure of MENASA artists and stories throughout performing arts history.
 - a. “Spaces that bring us together don’t happen too often, which is a part of this difficulty. We are not connected in a legitimizing way. We can tackle exclusion and erasure by championing each other and bridging opportunities to one another.”
 - b. “Remind ourselves that we’re not a minority, we are a part of the global majority.”
 - c. There was also mention that we need to remind ourselves that we cannot speak on behalf of other cultures in the MENASA umbrella. While we have similarities, we must not ignore our differences, as the lack of specificity neutralizes us.
 - d. There was an expressed desire for creating a concrete network and a contact list.
3. Harmful stereotypes and/or microaggressions when MENASA stories/perspectives are depicted.
 - a. Someone asks are we starting these stereotypes on an internal level. “Do the stories I pitch reproduce a certain stereotype because that’s what gets the grant?”
 - b. “How do we stop writing stories that are just about our harm?”
 - c. “Are we over-orientalizing ourselves?”
 - d. “How can we incorporate more of the resources by having a cultural consultant come in and we don’t reproduce the harms we see in misrepresentation?”
4. Many cultures and cultural differences that fall under the term MENASA + How each culture requires/deserves its own.
 - a. “What we learned is that we cannot solve this in one workshop.”
 - b. “It needs much time and energy in order to discern and recognize and learn about these through academic ways.”

What participants demonstrate is a rich desire to thoroughly engage in personal and communal meaning making along these parts of identity. I ask, what permission do we have to share parts of ourselves and expressions of our centre of being that don’t fit the expected paradigms and representations? Are we given that access in Canadian arts and theatre? In Toronto, I found myself joining the circle near the end of the last day. I wanted to name and advocate that queer MENASA artists *need* the advocacy of our cis-straight allies in spaces we aren’t invited into. A Black Arab artist said the same extends to their experience of anti-Black racism within these communities. Femme and woman artists named that all of us have a responsibility to advocate for them in male-dominated spaces. Our reflections ultimately demonstrated the plurality of our communities and the ways we advocate, uplift, and show up for one another is exactly the role modelling required for our artistic leaders.

At this point, in both consultations, I was feeling deflated. The burden of coming from a marginalized community is that we spend so much time discerning what and how our oppressions manifest and we spend less time creating art. I worry about this. Art making is the process which

helps us discern what and how our oppressions manifest and operate. It is meaning making in itself, and it is meaning making that extends beyond the limitations of what the mind can understand. It demands more depth. It further helps us imagine possible futures of connection, possibilities of elastic, dynamic, ever-changing, and living identity. Art making is the process of metabolizing and integrating conflicting, contradictory, and irreconcilable parts of ourselves, our cultures, our languages, and our experiences. When we spend so much time in the mind, intellectualizing and organizing our experiences, we get to spend less time integrating, embodying, daydreaming, and manifesting meaning-making from our experience. And what is excellent artistic and literary expression if not the most dignified process of meaning-making available to us? Through art—theatre, dance, and performance creation—we can ask “who are we? And who do we wish to be?” in a more substantive way in pursuit of meaning-making. My overwhelming advocacy is that the only way to overcome these harmful stereotypes and misrepresentations is for artistic leaders to create spaces for MENASA artists where artistic expression, creation, and production is accessible. It is an opportunity to trust and empower us to tell our own stories and free us from this erasure.

This feels distant.

It feels particularly distant in this acute and enduring moment of pain that’s imploded upon many MENASA artists’ hearts: the Palestinian Struggle. In the following, we will reflect on how this conversation showed up in our consultations.

The Palestinian Struggle

Reflecting on this acute and enduring moment of pain

These consultations took place in March and April of 2024, but their organizing took place long before the events of October 7, 2023. It wasn't our intention to spotlight this issue, but of course, this was a topic that was present and heavy on the hearts of many participants by the time we came to these consultations. At this point, the genocidal response to the events of October 7, by the Israeli government toward the Palestinian people of Gaza, had been going on for over a year. As of writing this essay, the genocide continues, with full impunity and increasing absurdity.

I'm reluctant to write these words. It's absurdly controversial to say that Israel's response toward the Gazans, has more than met legal definitions of apartheid, collective punishment, ethnic cleansing, forced starvation, and genocidal intent. There's a lot to discuss here, but I want to link this back into the broader aim of this essay; how does this relate to the theatre and performance arts industry?

[While the world has been awakening and reckoning with this over the past year](#), this isn't anything new to many MENASA people. The Palestinian Struggle has been something on our doorstep, certainly for my entire life. It was no surprise then, that many of the participants entered the space, in both Montreal and Toronto, with visible support for Palestine, whether in the form of a Keffiyeh or as pins with the Palestinian flag or the [emblematic watermelon](#).

Early in the Toronto consultation, a participant said the following:

"It's been hard to think about anything else but Palestine and it's been hard to feel like anything matters. It's been very tough to find value in art and the theatre in Canada at least. When clearly what is needed is political and social action. I've been very disheartened and discouraged by institutions across the board and very heartened by the people that have shown up."

Other's continued:

"I'm grateful for the people bringing up Palestine. Whenever someone brings up Gaza, it opens a tap."

"There's a lack of care and a lack of accessibility to the Palestinian struggle... it makes me as an artist disillusioned about the world."

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about Gaza. It's the month of Ramadan and I'm reflecting on it a lot."

The demoralization was palpable. We are living in a moment where many theatres themselves are struggling to keep their programming robust and their doors open. What could theatre possibly do about a moment that is so much bigger than theatre?

But what I heard from participants was not a demand for theatre leaders and institutions to find a *solution* for the Palestinian Struggle. The ask was much simpler. They simply needed affirmations of solidarity – for no reason other than to know that they themselves are safe within these institutions. They needed to address the censorship against Palestinian and MENASA voices taking place in the media and they needed to know that theatre leaders would stand against this censorship.

If MENASA artists are subject to the logics of orientalism and war, this moment of genocide against the Palestinians, is actually perfectly par the course for the Western world. What kind of MENASA stories, what kind of artists, and what kind of invitations are cultural institutions genuinely invested in integrating into their visions? It seems, ones that don't genuinely challenge the supremacy of the Western world.

One participant shares, *"the arts community is so small and in some ways less powerful than other industries. Our institutions are our voices. In the end that's what we have. To expect so little from them is what's killing me."*

There was a sense of holding understanding while also asking for accountability from our institutions by many participants. There is a fear that it is hypocritical of arts organizations to espouse values of reconciliation, decolonization, and antiracism but say and do so little about the Palestinian Struggle and this ongoing moment of acute pain. Others recognized that there are indeed companies that have spoken up and continue to speak up against what is happening in Gaza but others still struggled with the fear that they may not receive work due to their advocacy.

The expectation is not for the arts institution to politically transform this moment, but there is an expectation to engage and to do what the arts do best: to respond, to reflect, to ponder, to sit in the muck and the disturbance, to challenge the censorship of marginalized voices, to sit in contradiction, to sit in paradox, and then to change, slowly and surely, the hearts and minds of those we can impact. This is deep, intergenerational work. But, instead, the genocide, evidenced by all metrics, has been mostly met with quiet. And perhaps, dangerously, a quiet virtue signalling of allyship to Zionist funders that contribute to these cultural institutions.

One participant reflects *"Palestine and the quiet around it in the arts industry is exhausting. How are we responding to it?"*

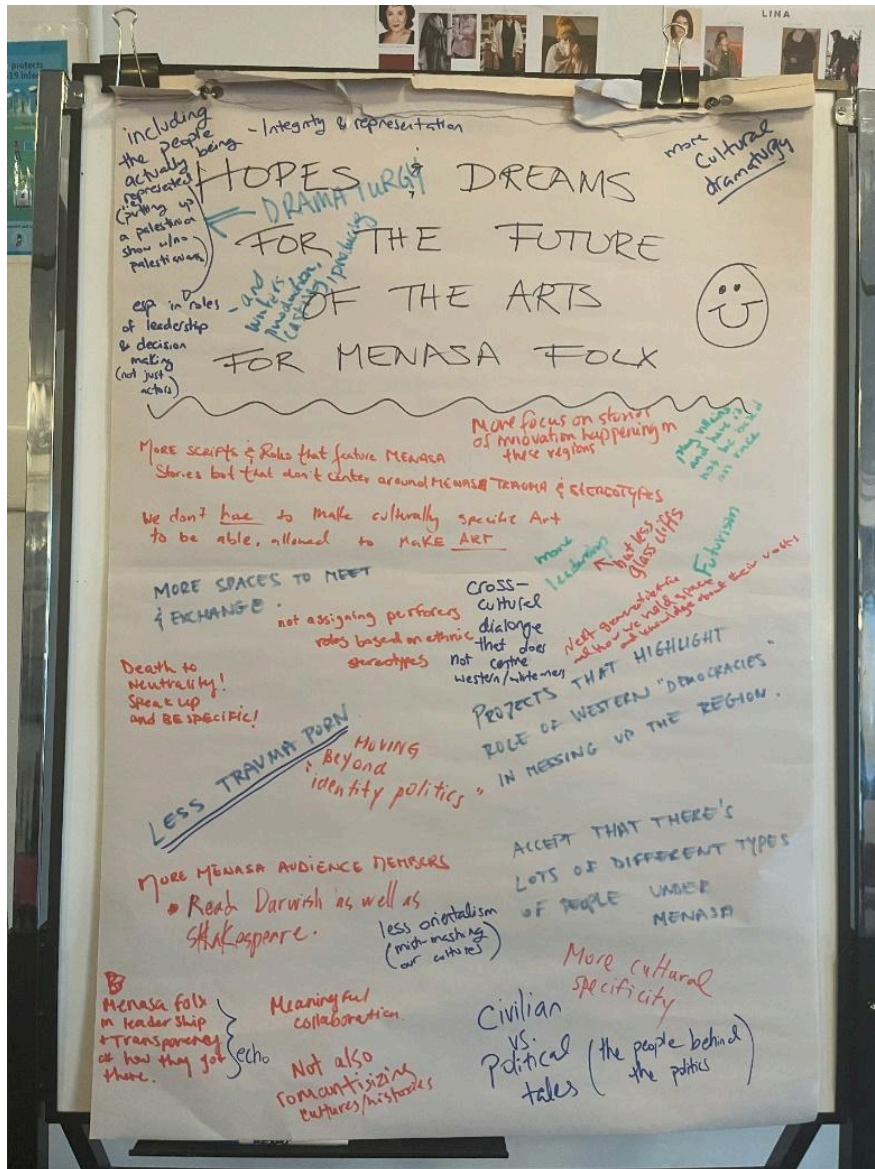
The personal becomes political and vice versa, where our own behaviors become politicized in this moment. We fear being blacklisted and censored as artists within our small communities. We worry that our life's work becomes antithetical to how our institutions will support us. To shrug off the Palestinian Struggle, as MENASA artists, is akin to asking a Black artist to forget the legacy of slavery and how it continues to exist today, or to ask an Indigenous artist to 'get over' the colonization of their lands. The Palestinian Struggle is deeply emblematic of the orientalist/war framework which subused us under Western culture. And in fact, curiously enough, both the legacies of slavery that still exist today and the ways Indigenous people in so-called Canada struggle for their land, are deeply and continuously tied to the Palestinian Struggle. If arts organizations are serious about their anti-racism advocacies, their desires to decolonize the theatre, then they ought to be serious about engaging with the Palestinian Struggle. They have an opportunity to be fearless, join the other leaders who have already spoken up and out, commit to justice above wealth, and demonstrate the spirit of artistry; one of courage, paradox, and a sublime unearthing of compassion.

There are ways through this, together; In the final section, I reflect on the ways participants strategize for a future that integrates our knowledge and advocacies for MENASA artists.

How Do We Keep Going?

Ideas, strategies, and advocacy for future building

For all the difficulty and contention that was discussed over a period of six consultation days, there is something more powerful that remains ringing through the noise. There was an undeniable joy in gathering. It was the moments of connection between activities where, I felt, the sublime work took place. A participant harkens “how rare is this opportunity?” Another participant, a mixed race Egyptian and Québécoise woman, says with a smile “I feel like I’m a part of something, I can proudly say I’m a brown woman here. Wow.” Even before we began brainstorming all the ways forward, it was the simple act of gathering that was in itself transformative and radical.



Graphic of “hopes and dreams for the future of the arts for MENASA folk”

Through the act of looking at our identities, reckoning with the ways we are exploited and marginalized, and expressing our grief and duty toward the Palestinian Struggle, we came to the top of a hill where we were able to consider the ways forward. This advocacy is a gift to theatre institutions. The work is long, intergenerational, and must be very intentional. One participant says, *“the only way we can tackle this complex relationship to identity is to have conversations with companies and leaders to teach about who we are and the complexity of who we are.”*

The graphic above identifies some of the “Hopes and Dreams for the Future of the Arts for MENASA Folx.” Participants reflect on the need for “more focus on stories of innovation happening in these regions,” “more scripts and roles and future MENASA stories but that don’t center around MENASA trauma and stereotypes,” “More spaces to meet and exchange,” “Cross cultural dialogue that does not center whiteness,” “Projects that highlight the role of western ‘democracies’ role in messing up the region,” and a desire for “moving beyond identity politics.” The hopes and dreams are as expansive as the participants who made up the consultations.

Near the end of the final day of the Toronto consultation, participants worked through a rich activity which invited reflection for future organizing, aiming the reflections towards three groups with the first being “Within this group (the Toronto and Montreal consultation participants),” “Within MENASA communities,” and “Outside.”

Participants provided ideas for four categories:

- (1) Questions (What else needs to be asked, unpacked, and deepened?)
- (2) Avalanche Movements (Education, institutions)
- (3) Pathway Movements (Steps to action, recommendations)
- (4) Not Sure (But something needs to be done)

The table below is a transcription of the work done together on a white board.

	Questions (What else needs to be asked, unpacked, and deepened?)	Avalanche Movements (Education, institutions)	Pathway Movements (Steps to action, recommendations)	Not Sure (But something needs to be done)
Within this group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Who are we bringing in? - Where do we need to heal and how? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Keep meeting - Watch SORT OF + more 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cultural content exchange - Reading club - Language sharing - CANADIAN - Resource network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intergenerational bonding - ARTS, ADVOCACY AND ENGAGEMENT
Within MENASA communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Audience engagement within communities (new and sustaining) - Relationship building - Human intersectional support - Why dehumanize ourselves? - Are we cheating? - Healing? How to model? - How do we build space? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Keep meeting - Mentorship/partnership - Better impact storytelling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gather stories of what’s working - Resource network - Connect the disciplines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community center (i.e. physical space; Daniel Spectrum) - Support youth - Support each other sustainably - Intergenerational learning - ARTS, ADVOCACY AND ENGAGEMENT

<p>Outside MENASA communities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opening/invite ways of working - Relationship building (organization to organization) - Outreach - Grassroots versus formal (institutions) - Labels/identity plays/artistic growth trends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Keep meeting - Sector context sessions - Mentorship/partnership (skills-based) - Settlement funding – outside arts funding - Transparency of how 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community gathering/meals - Normalizing subtitles - Examples of what's working - CANASIAN - Resource network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Specific vs universal artistic offerings. - Professional vs. community - ARTS, ADVOCACY, and ENGAGEMENT
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What stands out to me is that most of this advocacy is something theatre companies and cultural institutions are familiar with. The demands of MENASA artists aren't all too different from those emanating from other cultural locus of knowledge. We wish for dialogue with our institutions that provide us an opportunity to define our diverse cultural make up, we want mentorship opportunities, a passing along of the knowledge which are housed in these institutions, we wish for opportunities to gather over food, art, and resource exchange. There is a desire for intentional and deliberate audience outreach, and we can support the companies in defining this outreach. We wish for stories that defy stereotypes and avoid reproducing harmful misrepresentations. There is a wish for some sort of consistent gathering resource and exchange network, this would be the first of its kind in Canada, but there are some models in the United States which we can use to inspire our organizing. We wish for our own space, perhaps a company that mandates our communities.

The contours and specifics of how these action items play out will indeed be specific to MENASA communities, but all of this is something Black, Indigenous, Asian, Queer, Trans, Disabled, and more communities have already advocated for within their respective communities. I remind us of this to encourage theatre companies and arts institutions to be courageous when building community with MENASA artists. There is a precedent. The work begins with offering space, listening to the voices of those most marginalized, and nurturing artists and audiences from our communities to become a part of the cultural fabric of our institutions. We aren't suggesting this is easy work. In fact, one participant poignantly says, with some humour, *"Theatre companies are held together by duct tape and a prayer. People are burnt out already."* We want to help but we need institutions to turn their gaze towards MENASA artists with intention, clarity, commitment, and courage, not orientalism.

The path forward is only together. It is a rare and unique opportunity to bring together MENASA artists, leaders, and organizers and we need our allies to join us in this effort. As we discovered within the structure of our own consultations, the line between institution and artist is thin and many of us exist between the two and as both. This work doesn't need to happen alone, and it certainly doesn't need to happen in silos. What we hope to achieve with these consultations is a stepping stone, one that invites other institutions and MENASA artists to begin building a rich and responsive network that will allow us to continue contributing, legitimizing, and transforming the performance industry in the land we all share together here.

Conclusion

A gathering of MENASA artists was inspiring and confusing all at once. Who are we? Who do we wish to be? Who have we been? And how are we interrelated? These questions kept tumbling through the participants and each time we found some sort of answer, it felt like a hundred new questions arose. At the end of our consultations, I was left thinking about a Buddhist concept: the opposite of polarization is paradox. If it isn't a paradox, it isn't the truth. And certainly, we experienced a lot of paradoxes in our gathering. That is to say, perhaps we experienced a lot of truth.

We don't speak for all MENASA artists through these consultations. We simply hope to generate and contribute to a conversation that asks one another 'how do we sit in the gray area of being in the likeness that we share, while understanding the diversities and differences we possess?' How do we acknowledge the harms we cause while asking for accountability for the harms we endure?'

I leave our consultations thinking that the first step of this work isn't actually to determine our problems or define ourselves. But more significantly, it is to learn how to sit in the paradox, how to make a practice out of paradox, how to hold grace, forgiveness, accountability and boundaries with multiple truths. That task, to me, feels like the underlying work that can help us in combating systemic barriers and can bring us to definition of who we are with much truth. There is something shared amongst us that we *feel*, that's why we all gathered, there has been deliberate and historical reasons to sever us from one another. Part of this sublime work is antithetical to the imperialist missions that separated us to begin with. Our spiritual or sublime liberation is the most dangerous thing to those who wish to weaponize and antagonize our differences against each other. So our spiritual and sublime liberation is the greatest opportunity we have together.

This work needs healers, builders, and visionaries. We need leaders who will think about what could replace this imperialism that we're under. Who has better ideas? Are our ideas within the MENASA community encompassing to everyone, and not in a sensational way, but in an intersectional and anti-oppressive way? We need those thinkers. We need the ones who can reconstruct, who can interrogate, who can cauterize wounds, who can identify problems, who can recognize the issues and speak truth to power. We need it all and we need your support with us.

The work ahead is intergenerational and multipolar, the work is on-going and ever changing because we are intergenerational, we are multipolar, and we are on-going and ever changing. Only through this fog are we able to discover all we are and all we could be.