

P2C2E Indeed

The Rep flounders bravely in the Sea of Stories.

By [Lisa Drostova](#)

December 18, 2002

When Salman Rushdie wrote his novel *Midnight's Children* about the partition of India and Pakistan, he blended magical realism's hallucinatory quality with the rhythms and motifs of traditional storytelling, creating a world that was kaleidoscopic, opulent, dense, and whimsical all at once. The novel also was deeply and unabashedly political. Rushdie won Britain's esteemed Booker Prize for *Children*, his second novel, and every fiction work since has been marked by that same balance between beauty and awareness of social injustice.

Haroun and the Sea of Stories, written first as a novel and then adapted for the stage, is no different. Rushdie originally created *Haroun* as a series of bath-time stories for his son, in which he raised questions about censorship, the nature of creativity, and what happens to a stifled spirit. *Haroun's* character Rashid has been silenced, just as Rushdie himself once was silenced following the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, although the author apparently began *Haroun* before the Ayatollah Khomeini announced the fatwa that put a price on his head.

Rushdie has a lot to say about external censorship and the governments under which it flourishes. That said, the Berkeley Rep's current production of *Haroun* is a mixed experience. There's great acting, movement, song, and many moments of real wonder. But although the production was anointed by Rushdie himself -- who is, in artistic director Tony Taccone's words, "a totally generous dude" -- it rattles fiercely. The story is confusing, takes a long time to take off, and the effects-laden staging sometimes lacks juice.

In the mythical next-door universe where *Haroun* takes place, the evil cult master Khattum-Shud has very firm ideas about the worthlessness of stories -- especially stories that aren't true, stories told for fun. "The world is not for fun; the world is for control!" he screams, as his minions prepare to end the flow of stories once and for all. It seems that there is literally a great ocean of stories, and one gets access to the water by subscription. Haroun's father, master storyteller Rashid Khalifa, takes both his subscription and his wife for granted. When both are lost, Rashid and Haroun set out on a desperate quest to retrieve Rashid's gift. But in the end it falls to Haroun alone to make things right. As he and his father visit the moon Kahani, they discover that the Ocean of Story is becoming polluted -- *and* evil old Khattum-Shud is planning to plug the whole thing up anyway.

The audience needs a scoreboard by the time Haroun and Rashid get to Kahani, where they face warring populations of goofballs. It's often hard to keep track of what's happening, or to whom it's happening. The lost mother, the ineffectual father, the child questing alone for the magic whasis that will put things right -- it's a story as old as the human voice, one that seems to show up in every storytelling tradition. But while Rushdie is playing all the expected mythical notes, they're spread farther apart than we're accustomed to.

While the material is problematic, far and away the strongest aspect of this production is the acting. Rushdie has populated Kahani and Haroun's town -- a city so sad it has forgotten its own name,



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where factories package this unhappiness and ship it out to the world -- with the most unexpected and often delightful characters. There's a magic hoopoe bird (Jarion Monroe) that makes the most hilarious noises and flies with beautiful snap-on wings. There are the graceful Shadows and Plentimaw fish. The fearless David Kelly appears as the djinn Iff, a Chinese character painted on his stomach and a strange contraption strapped to his back. Iff is the one who has to break the news to Haroun about the P2C2E (Processes Too Complicated to Explain) by which Rashid might get his story mojo back. Unfortunately, these processes stretch even the explanatory powers of the actors themselves.

Rashid himself is sweetly played by director Dominique Serrand as alternately strutting and suffering. Perhaps because Serrand is French and his training exalts the physical, the physical characterizations are strong and idiosyncratic in this production, from Mrs. Sangupta's bouncing-balloon perambulations across the catwalk to the way the politician's henchmen march Rashid around. There's a little Monty Python "Ministry of Silly Walks" stuff going on here, but it's not just walks -- it's funny laughs, and funny swimming, and a bizarre dancing ambassador with a strange and amazing voice. The actors seem to be enjoying themselves immensely. And why not? The language of the play is rich and witty. "Popular romances have become long lists of shopping expeditions," complains the gardener who tries to tend the water gardens in the Ocean of Stories, who also bemoans the current "spate of novels about wizards in boarding schools."

Adding to the confusion is the stripped-down set design. Over the summer, the kids in the Berkeley Rep's educational program at the Nevo Center got a taste of a scenic designer's work when they designed alternative sets for *Haroun*. The models, proudly displayed in the Nevo lobby, all seemed to be of a scene where Haroun tries to rescue a princess in a tall tower, and all were fairly elaborate. The real set by contrast couldn't be much simpler than it is. Green and blue, with a red catwalk and holes in the floor that appear and disappear, the set is a canvas on which the audience is expected to paint their own picture of the locales where the story takes place. It's a calculated risk, and one that makes the stage seem outsize and cold as the actors pinball from point to point, although it's very effective when Haroun finally confronts Khattum-Shud. Many of the technical bells and whistles built into the new Roda stage are still being sounded in this production, especially when it comes to water effects; some are lovely, but others border on distracting.

Like Rushdie's novels, the Berkeley Rep production of *Haroun* is a hectic and loopy ride, full of ideas and surprises. Serrand and the Rep make a strong effort, presenting an experience that is not quite like reading the novels but still gives a flavor of the awkward and miraculous oceans of Rushdie's imagination. But just as one can't imagine a reader easily digesting one of the novels in one sitting, that may be the primary challenge in translating Rushdie's work to the stage: There is simply too much to absorb in one evening.