

The Daily Californian

[Sea Escape](#)

Lush Scenery Trumps Plot in ♦Haroun'

BY [Sarah Mourra](#)

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Courtesy/Berkeley Repertory

A Mechanical Bird (Jarion Monroe) carries Iff and Haroun.

If I were totally and completely deaf and mute, I would still have enjoyed "Haroun and the Sea of Stories," almost as much as I did with all my faculties intact.

As an adaptation of a British adaptation of Salman Rushdie's original book, Berkeley Rep's new production dishes out lukewarm narrative and drama, instead finding strength and breathing room in the aesthetics of its visual presentation.

The story is based on Rushdie's novel about a young boy named Haroun (played "pantyhose" by the wonderfully wide-eyed Nora El Samahy) whose father, the great storyteller Rashid Khalifa, loses his ability to tell stories. Soon after this, Haroun's mother, Soraya, leaves Rashid for the next-door neighbor, a clerical worker.

Together, Rashid and Haroun go on a fantastical quest to the moon to get the stories (and his mother) back. They battle the forces of silence and darkness (led by boring clerical types overseen by a fellow named Khatam-Sud, whose name means "The End"). Joined by an entourage of crazy characters, they try to heal the polluted waters of the Sea of Stories and battle the forces of silence in a ticklish allegory about censorship, stories and the power of the written and spoken word. The self-conscious wordplays and metaphors can be enjoyed even by audiences unfamiliar with Rushdie's own battle with censorship (he was forced to go into hiding when the Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa, death sentence, on his head for his book *The Satanic Verses*).

The set is like something out of a Magritte painting, or a Salvador Dali wet dream. The sparse stage is illuminated in cool pale blues and greens with a red metal catwalk across the top. Billowing veils fall from the ceiling and water and rain are favorite motifs throughout. In one particular scene Haroun dances as water falls onto the stage and small lights flashing all over the stage simulate the rest of the rainstorm. Soraya, played by haunting beauty Jennifer Baldwin Peden, wanders the stage surrealist-style, singing angelically and giving the play its dreamlike quality. Director and scenic designer Dominique Serrand does a breathtaking job in his creation of small pools of water onstage, where Soraya and Rashid (played by super-multi-tasker Serrand himself) flounder among long strips of cloth with writing on them. The music swells as both of them move in slow motion, limbs dripping in ethereal white garments, grasping onto each other.

Costume designer Sonya Berlovitz clothes her characters in bright silks and satins, exaggerating their shapes with cartoonish petticoats and towering turbans. The play has a timeless quality, with parasol-carrying British accented royalty, a neurotic chicken-like bird with a Fargo-accent, and a flamboyant water genie who talks and gestures like he's from the Castro district.

Walking out of the 100 minute production, theater-goers will find themselves tickled with a sense of magic and whimsy that they probably have not experienced since, well, since finishing the last Harry Potter book. Haroun and the Sea of Stories doubles as a sweet child's fairy tale while giving an important message about the power of stories-as the ending finally answers Soraya's persistent question "What good are stories, if they aren't even real?"