

**Tanya Shaffer and Samia Mounts of *The Fourth Messenger***



Photography by Tess Mayer

*"What if the Buddha were a woman, living in our times? Mama Sid is a modern-day "awakened one" with a worldwide following. But a determined young woman seeks to unearth Mama Sid's mysterious past, exposing secrets that could change everything. Epic and intimate, comic and profound, 'The Fourth Messenger' investigates what it means to be both enlightened and human."*

Book and lyrics by Tanya Shaffer. Starring Samia Mounts. For tickets and more information, click [here](#).

**What are you hoping audiences take away from the show?**

**Tanya:** I hope audiences take away a really rich experience and a sense of compassion and complexity—the complexity of different people's viewpoints and callings and how sometimes they come into conflict and there's no right and there's no wrong. There's just different perspectives. And I hope people come out wrestling with it, and some people thinking this character did the wrong thing and this character did the right thing, and others thinking the opposite. I hope it engenders compassion, and I also hope that they had a fabulous time and a rich emotional experience, and that they laughed and cried.

**Samia:** I echo what Tanya said. Compassion is one of the core tenets of my life philosophy, as is this idea of complexity and a gray area and how nothing is really black and white or super simple. I was attracted to this piece because of its true-to-life depiction of human beings who are looking for love and acceptance without trying to paint them as stereotypes or archetypes, but actually painting them as complex and real as human beings really are.

**What about this development process have you found the most useful or the most interesting?**

**Tanya:** I think we're in a somewhat different position than a lot of shows. Our show has actually had a lot of development for a number of years, and has had a couple of previous productions. For NYMF, our main goal in bringing it here was really to bring it to a wider audience. But every production is an opportunity for further development. And we had to make cuts because NYMF has this two-hour limit. I think that ended up being useful because it helped us to pare down, to figure out what is most essential. It meant cutting at least ten minutes out of a show that had been worked on a lot. But in the end, I think some of those cuts got it to its best, tightest self, and that was helpful.

**Samia:** For me, getting to play the character of Raina has really been an exercise in economy. She has to go through a very intense emotional journey that she can't show outwardly for most of the show. So, learning how to have a poker face on but still have emotional life happening internally has been quite the challenge. It's been a wonderful growing experience for me as an actor and as a singer.



Samia Mounts

**What's something you think can be done to get different audiences to engage with theatre or get audiences to engage differently?**

**Tanya:** I think *Hamilton* shows you that if you get a musical that feels relevant, young people will come out for it. I think it's a question of writing musicals and making them feel relevant and casting them in a way that looks like the real world. But then the question is how do you get the word out to

people so that buzz gets going, and that's the million-dollar question. We're all trying. We've got social media, you bring down ticket prices, you do what you can to engage young people and help them to see that, wow, theatre matters. So you have got to write theatre that matters, and you have got to get the word out that theatre matters.

**Samia:** I think there's definitely a growing trend in theatergoing audiences where people are yearning for new, original pieces of theatre, and getting a little bit tired of all the movie adaptations and super commercially viable projects. I think people are yearning for stories that are more human and more intimate, which this piece certainly fulfills, and the response that I've gotten from my circles, just posting on my social media accounts, has been enormously positive. People just hear the *Aida* premise of this musical and they're interested. Also, the fact that we have a female writing team, which you don't see too often in musical theatre—that's what attracted me to this project—a lot of my feminist friends hear just that, and they're like, "Oh, I'm going to go support this." The tides are starting to turn. A lot of young people are looking for new stories, more complex stories, more true-to-life stories, and looking to see diverse casting on stages. I think those audiences are there, and we are doing everything we can to reach them. But I think it's growing. I think it's a trend that it's going to get bigger. I hope.

**You are at different points in your careers and in different disciplines, but what's something that you think would make it easier for you to pursue your creative goals in the way you want to pursue them?**

**Samia:** My biggest obstacle in the past was that I was either too ethnic or not ethnic enough. Because I'm half-Arabic. So I don't fit token ethnic, but in the past, I was never considered for any of the leads in shows because I wasn't all-American looking. That has changed in the last few years. For me, that's already happening, but I'd like to see it happen more. I'd like to see more musicals like *Aladdin* on Broadway representing Middle Eastern actors. I'd like Middle Eastern actors to be more represented in general in theatre. And not just as terrorists. Or cab drivers.

**Tanya:** I think the biggest thing is funding for the arts, in general. As a playwright, things take me a long time to write, and if I'm having to chase other income and I have two kids [that makes it more difficult]. I was a resident playwright at Playwrights Foundation in San Francisco for four years; that was great. It wasn't funding my life, but it gave me a place to work, and I developed this piece there over those four years. It was amazing because they would give me space and they would pay for actors to come in. Things like that are amazing. And they're shrinking. Very few theatres have the opportunity to give that kind of support to playwrights. So that kind of support from the government and from foundations that allows the development process to occur and, ideally, can give the playwright some support in that process so that they can have the time and space to develop the work. And for women in particular, there tends to be the child issue. In our society, women do tend to be the primary parents, so that just increases that need for some additional support and some additional funding to allow playwrights to have the time and space they need to develop the work on their own terms, so that they can put forward something true, and not something rushed or something that they're only doing for money.



Tanya Shaffer

**Beyond being located in America, what does the term “American theatre” mean to you?**

**Samia:** For me, the American theatre has always been able to capture such huge, epic emotions and has been able to put gigantic stories and characters into these wonderful pieces, both plays and musicals, in a way that really plumbs the depths of human emotion. That’s what it means to me. Telling the real stories and trying to put people whose stories are underrepresented in the public eye onstage is something that we’re really struggling to do right now in American theatre. You see all these new playwrights and productions and workshops and readings of shows that may never have gotten a second look, if all anyone was concerned about was making money. I don’t think that’s all anyone is concerned about at this point. I think more and more, you have people who want to make a positive impact with theatre and want to tell stories that don’t get told. I think a whole world is opening up in American theatre right now.

**Tanya:** I was thinking of the Brecht quote, “Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.” And I think it’s actually both—it’s a mirror and a hammer. When I think of American theatre, I think of theatre that reflects the American experience, which is huge, diverse—it’s not one experience but many, many experiences—and I think that by creating art about that experience, we help to shape it. Anything created in this country at this time is, in some way,

reflecting the creator's perspective on what this country is, and by reflecting, also continuing to define it. The more it reflects the huge diversity that is what makes our country amazing, the more rich and vital and relevant it will feel.