A new Please Touch play about bean pies, friendship, and Muslim American fortitude

By Heather Khalifa

This article is part of Made in Philly, a series about young residents shaping local communities.

If you go to any Sunni mosque in Philadelphia on a Friday afternoon, chances are it will most likely be serving bean pie at the end of Jummah, or Friday prayer.

Children’s book author Ameenah Muhammad-Diggins’ parents, like many African American Muslims in the 1970s, brought the tradition of baking and eating bean pie with them when they converted from the Nation of Islam to Sunni Islam.

But the significance of the bean pie goes a step further for Muhammad-Diggins. Her father co-owned Ali Bean Pie factory in West Oak Lane, where she grew up.

“It’s because of the bean pie that I was able to go to private school, because of the bean pie I was able to go to college,” said Muhammad-Diggins, who attended Sister Clara Muhammad School in West Philadelphia and the Fox School of Business at Temple University.

And ultimately it’s because of that bean pie, which Muhammad-Diggins built a children’s book around — and which the Please Touch Museum has now turned into a play — that children in Philadelphia are being entertained by the first Please Touch theatrical production to use actors from outside the museum’s longtime little troupe (now disbanded).

'Bashirah and the Amazing Bean Pie', now on stage through March 4 at the Please Touch Museum, is being presented in conjunction with the museum exhibit “America to Zanzibar: Muslim Cultures Near and Far.” The museum plans to bring it back in May for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

The play revolves around 8-year-old Bashirah, an African American Muslim, and her friend Fatima, who is Pakistani American. Young-adult actors play all the roles.

When their teacher asks the students to bring in a dish for culture day, Bashirah — played by Chanel Herron — proudly proclaims she will bring bean pie.

Fatima (Angie Fennell) scoffs at that. Beans in a pie? Bashirah then goes through an existential crisis, questioning the traditions and culture she grew up with.

“Am I weird?” Bashirah asked the audience out loud at a members-only performance the day before the play’s official Feb. 16 opening.

“Nooo,” some of the kids responded.

“Kids are always like that,” said Fennell. But although they’re vocal during the play, they’re suddenly shy when they meet the actors afterward.

Danielle Defassio, manager of...
Studio and Performing Arts at the museum, said young audiences go “off the rails” during plays because they identify so deeply with what’s happening in front of them.

After teasing Bashirah at school, Fatima later needs her friend’s help to cook biryani when her stove breaks. Ultimately, the friendship mends.

The plot of the theatrical production, written by Defassio in consultation with Muhammad-Diggins, differs from Muhammad-Diggins’ book, which focuses more on Eid morning, the Muslim holiday, than on the relationship between the two friends.

“I really love the direction of the play for that,” Muhammad-Diggins said, “just to get kids thinking about how they should express themselves, how to mend friendships when you have disagreements, appreciating other people’s cultures even if you don’t understand it, and there’s nothing weird about anybody, especially when it comes to cultural things.”

The idea to develop a play from the book grew out of the museum’s inaugural Eid festival last summer, at which Muhammad-Diggins read from Bashirah.

Salima Suswell, a member of the Please Touch Museum’s advisory committee, was developing the America to Zanzibar exhibit to better reflect the community around the museum, and she had invited Muhammad-Diggins in to do the reading.

“You really can’t walk half a block without seeing another Muslim,” said Muhammad-Diggins. “So they said, ‘OK, let’s really take a look at our surroundings and do programming that will reflect our community.’ I think that’s a bold step for — it’s one of the top 10 children’s museums in the nation — to do that.”

Muhammad-Diggins’ own motivation to write her book was twofold: She wanted Muslim children to see themselves represented in literature. And she also wanted to address the gaps she sees in how U.S. history views African American Muslims specifically.

“As African Americans, there’s more than one story,” she said. “Most of the time, there’s the church-centered view of black folk in America.

“Muslims have had a very important role in the shaping of history, and a lot of people don’t know that 12 to 25 percent of the Africans brought to America were enslaved Muslims,” she said. “I think that part is kind of left out.”

Defassio knew more generally that a story about food would resonate well with kids.

“Everybody can get behind food, everybody has a favorite food they want to share, so I felt like this one would really speak to everybody, no matter your gender, no matter where you’re from or what you believe,” Defassio said.

“And I was so happy not to have to do Aladdin.”
Defassio has been working since she started her job in 2017 to move away from puppet shows and one-person productions and toward mainstage plays that both entertain and inform.

Bashirah will be a model for future productions. “It’s all about the authenticity of the story,” Defassio said.

Writing the script, she chose to use Arabic words like bismillah instead of the English translation for the blessing over food. She had Muhammad-Diggins record herself saying phrases like “as salaam alaikum,” the Muslim greeting, so the actors knew how to say it correctly.

Defassio and Muhammad-Diggins said they made it a priority to cast as close to character as possible but weren’t able to cast Muslim actors for this production because of scheduling conflicts.

Fennell, who is of the Christian faith, said she was initially a little intimidated when she got the role of Fatima and wanted to be respectful of other people’s cultures.

She felt encouraged by the response from the play’s first run-through, when a Pakistani family approached her after the show. “The mom saying, ‘We’re from Pakistan, and it was so nice to be represented on stage,’ that was really special for me.”

The four-actor play also features Brishen Miller, who plays both a West African American student and Bashirah’s grandfather, and Nicole Stacie, who plays both the teacher and Bashirah’s mother.

Please Touch member Angela Ko saw the members-only performance of Bashirah with her 7-year-old daughter Carly and said it had a deeper meaning from other museum shows they’d seen.

“It’s just always kind of been fun or had bubbles,” Ko said. “This really hit a message in a fun way.”

Along with messages of friendship and cultural awareness, the message of unity was a point Muhammad-Diggins wanted to drive home.

At the very end of the play, the four actors line up to face the audience and recite their final line: “We are one ummah, one family.”