illuminations

A guide to the 2020 plays

Oregon Shakespeare Festival®

The Copper Children

The Copper Children

World Premiere | American Revolutions
By Karen Zacarías
Directed by Shariffa Ali

Notes by Julie Felise Dubiner

Who's Who

Sister Anna and Sister Francis: Two Irish Catholic nuns at the New York Foundling Hospital who bring 40 orphans across the country to the Arizona Territory hoping to settle them with good Catholic families.

Swayne: An agent for the New York Catholic Church in charge of all the logistics regarding travel and placement of the foundlings.

Father Mandin: A French priest newly stationed in the town of Clifton, Arizona Territory, who acts as a go-between for the Foundling Hospital and prospective Catholic mothers in his new town.

Alwynne: A young Irish Catholic woman unable to take care of her child.

The Mayor: He is the mayor of New York City, which has an enormous crisis of unaccompanied children living on the streets. He will go for any solution, as long as it makes him and New York look good.

Margarita: A respected Mexican woman in Clifton. She is educated, diplomatic and sharp. And she longs for a child.

Cornelio: Margarita's husband, a smelter in the copper mine. A leader among the workers.

Gloria: Cornelio's sister, Margarita's sister-in-law. She is a widow whose husband was killed while on strike the previous year.

Charles Mills: A powerful Anglo in Clifton. He runs the company store.

Lottie Mills: Charles's wife. She also longs for a child.

The Story

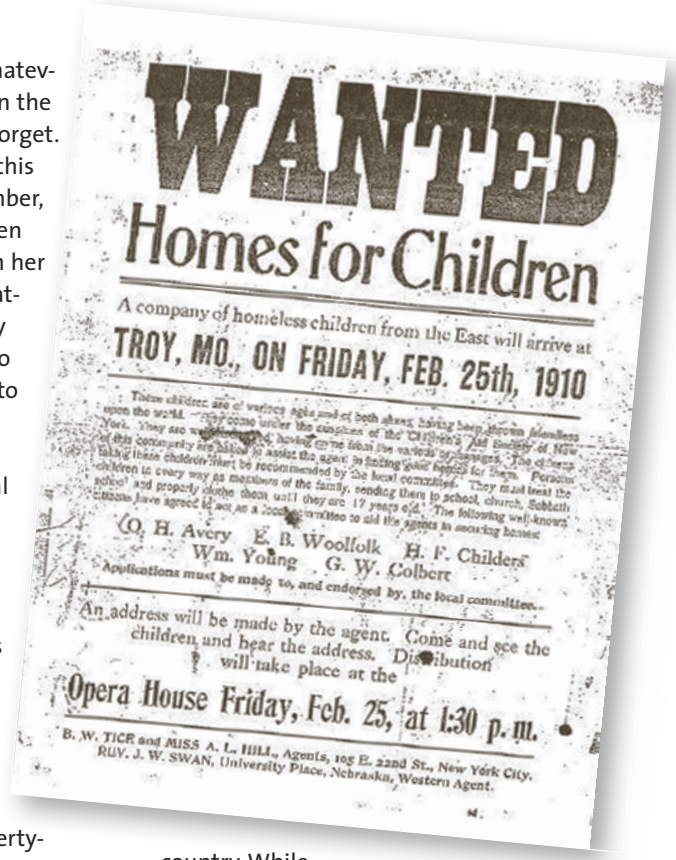
An artistic interpretation of a real incident in American history, *The Copper Children* is a theatrical investigation of race, motherhood, religion and American-ness. In 1904, the Foundling Hospital in New York City, a Catholic charity home for orphans and abandoned children, has more wards in its care than it can handle. Following the lead of their Protestant counterparts, they come up with a plan to send a train of these discarded Irish children west and place them with Catholic families. The local priest of Clifton-Morenci in the Arizona Territory arranges for the placement of 40 of the foundlings among his parishioners in this dusty town where the entire population has high rates of infer-

tility and child mortality likely due to the air, water and earth being devastatingly polluted from copper mining operations. When the Mercy Train arrives with the nuns and their charges, they discover that the Catholics in Clifton are Mexican. As the children are distributed among their new parents, the Anglos in the town form a mob to remove the children from their new homes and take them for their own. Are they rescuing the children? Or kidnapping them?

Real people, real consequences

When the train pulled into the station on the evening of October 4, 1904, the women of Clifton, a copper mining town in the Arizona Territory, were there to meet it. The crowd gawked as the nuns and nurses brought the children to the platform. After the long trip from New York, one can imagine how tired they all must have been, but their caretakers dressed them in clean, new clothes—sailor suits for the boys, white dresses and curled hair for the girls. As they came into view, these previously abandoned children—foundlings—were suddenly and extremely wanted. So wanted that the case went all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States.

It's easy to get caught up in whatever the latest salacious story is in the news. And then we so quickly forget. Which trial of the century is it this week? What we have to remember, what we have to see, what Karen Zacarías demands we look at in her inimitable, pointed, smart, theatrical way is that there are many sides to every story. There are so many circumstances that lead to every outcome, even when the outcome isn't what we want. Most importantly, there are real people at the centers of these stories and real consequences for their lives.


WANTED
Homes for Children
A company of homeless children from the East will arrive at
TROY, MO., ON FRIDAY, FEB. 25th, 1910
O. H. Avery E. B. Woolfolk H. F. Childers
Wm. Young G. W. Colbert
Applications must be made to, and endorsed by, the local committee.
An address will be made by the agent. Come and see the children and hear the address. Distribution will take place at the
Opera House Friday, Feb. 25, at 1:30 p. m.
B. W. TICE and MISS A. L. HILL, Agents, 105 E. 22nd St., New York City.
REV. J. W. SWAN, University Place, Nebraska, Western Agent.

In *The Copper Children*, perhaps the first circumstance to look at is the crisis facing Eastern cities, in this case New York. The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw a massive influx of immigrants. Many were poverty-stricken in their old countries, and on arrival in the United States found only more poverty, along with the loneliness of leaving everyone and everything they knew behind, as well as the feeling of a broken promise of the American Dream. Women especially were vulnerable. Large numbers of young Irishwomen came over on their own; many others were abandoned or found themselves widowed in their new country. While they may have hoped to find work as a nanny or maid, instead they found themselves scraping by to survive. Often these women and their children had to resort to prostitution and theft, and the rising upper classes of the city were uncomfortable and felt unsafe. There were very few organizations providing what we would call social services, and no reliable, readily available, socially acceptable methods of birth control. Many mothers died, and many had no choice but to abandon their children. The streets of the city were not paved with gold; instead they were teeming with thousands of homeless children with no family, no adult supervision at all.


Sister Mary Irene FitzGibbon and orphan children at the New York Foundling Hospital in 1888. Photo by Jacob A. Riis.

Private citizens and institutions stepped up to try to serve the children and the city. In 1853, Charles Loring Brace, an evangelical Protestant, founded the Children's Aid Society of the City of New York. Prior to the Children's Aid Society, if an abandoned or orphaned child wasn't on the street, their only other option was the prison or the almshouse, where there was no separation between children and adults, and the sick and the healthy were thrown in together. The Orphan Trains were Brace's grandest idea. In 1864, he started the Emigration Department of the CAS with the goal to help immigrants move to the West. If New

York had too many people, well, the West didn't have enough. Manifest Destiny required more people to settle, more white people to colonize. Children were sent out on the marvel that was the railroad, and newspapers across the country carried stories of trains loaded up with kids. White adults showed up on the platforms in the West's new cities and towns to choose a child. By 1910, about 110,000 children had been sent out on the trains by CAS. While we can hope that these kids found good homes and lived better lives than they might have in the city, there were instances of people claiming children in a form of indentured servitude for farm work and domestic labor, and rampant stories of abuse of all kinds. Minnesota, Illinois and Indiana eventually prohibited these mass placements of children.

In the 1860s, the Catholic Sisters of Charity founded their own orphanages. The first in New York opened in 1870 on the Lower East Side. Eventually they raised enough money to build a complex on the Upper East Side, which included the Foundling Hospital for infants and toddlers under 4 years old. These Catholic institutions still exist in popular memory as the places with baskets where you could leave babies, where the nuns would take them in and care for them. But, as it was for the CAS and the city itself, there were just too many children to try to save. The women of the Foundling came up with their own version of the Emigration Department: Mercy Trains. They wanted more oversight, documentation and care than their Protestant counterparts had shown with the earlier Orphan Trains. Usually agents were sent out ahead to work with local clergy to find suitable Catholic families for their children (which didn't happen in the town of Clifton, Arizona Territory—it was too far away). After placement, the sisters would stay for a few weeks and make sure the homes were actually suitable. That the new families be Catholic was paramount—they were saving not only the children's lives, but their immortal souls.

Adoption was a different concept then than it is now. Throughout history people have taken in children, but the legal idea of it has changed drastically. In European culture, the Catholic Church had stepped in to care for orphaned and abandoned children since the Middle Ages. The goal was to place these children in homes either with relatives or people who would care for them, but the children were not necessarily thought of as the new family's own kids. For most of history, adoption came when the children reached adulthood as a way of making them eligible for inheritances. In the United States, it was not until 1851 that the first statute was passed regarding adoption of children when Massachusetts set up a judicial path requiring that evidence of permission from birth parents be introduced in order to transfer parental rights to someone else. In the late 19th century, especially in the United States, where immigration had stretched family bonds and so many children were left alone after the carnage of the Civil War, several attempts were made to formalize adoption, but most of the kids sent West were never legally adopted. In effect, the Orphan and Mercy Trains created a precursor to the modern foster care system. Laws regarding private and secret adoptions were enacted after World

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In this photo taken between 1880 and 1919, the children standing by the train are possibly orphans that came West in search of families. Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society.

War I and the influenza epidemic of 1918 left a huge number of children orphaned, abandoned or with surviving parents unable to care for them. Since the 1970s, there's been a shift toward open adoption. But we've never seen numbers of children without family in the United States the way we do when we look at the turn of the 20th century.

As the United States entered the Progressive Era, President Theodore Roosevelt took a special interest in children's welfare. Indeed, he would stick his nose into the case in question in *The Copper Children*. After the events presented here, oversight systems were put in place and Roosevelt created a Conference on the Care of Dependent Children. More than 10 years later, Minnesota became the first state requiring investigation and follow-up on placements, in an early version of a Department of Children and Family Services. Prioritizing children's welfare was a new concept, one that would be profoundly important to the people of Clifton, Arizona. And, much like today, the question remains: What should be the right way to decide what is best for the child? Or from another point of view: What makes a good family? What makes a good mother?

The West

The second circumstance should be the West itself, and Arizona in particular. The land that became the modern state of Arizona was purchased from Mexico after the Mexican-American War ended in 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and then more land was added by the United States in 1853. This area contains Oraibi, a Hopi village since at least 1150 A.D.—the oldest continuously inhabited settlement in the modern continental United States. And indeed, there is evidence going back 25,000 years of organized communities in the American Southwest. This is the land not only of the Hopi, but also the Pueblo, Zuni, Mojave, Apache, Havasupai, Yaqui, Navajo and more.

The first known European to arrive was a Catholic Priest, Marcos de Niza, in 1539. More Spanish followed, looking for gold. They built settlements in Tubac in 1752 and Tucson in 1775. Missions and more settlements followed, despite opposition from the indigenous population. The Apache in particular brutally resisted the European land grab. The United States Army, along with the settlers, fought them back. Army outposts were established all along the wagon trails, and soon after, the route of the new railroad. The government took the land and displaced the people by whatever means necessary as they connected the East and West coasts. They actively encouraged white settlement and protected newcomers as they made homes on this already occupied land.

Copper ore

And it wasn't just homes being built in Arizona, it was business. Copper had first been found by the Europeans in 1he 1580s, but in the 19th century advances in refining, transport and technology made it extremely valuable. By the late 19th century, copper was used in telegraphs, electricity, and soon, telephones. Mining quickly became the backbone of an emerging economy. In addition to copper, silver mines flourished and other minerals were processed and sold, bringing much investment and wealth to the area for the white owners. In the sister cities of Clifton-Morenci, where *The Copper Children* takes place, two enormous copper mining and smelting companies were in operation in 1904. The companies owned the whole

Women in 1904

The collision of women in *The Copper Children* gives us a microcosm of women's roles in the United States at the turn of the 20th century. We meet the poor Irish woman who can't care for her child in New York, and the other Irish women who found a respectable place in society as nuns. Out West, we meet the Anglo woman who works in her husband's store but still considers herself above the pious Mexican woman who teaches children in her home. The image of the "Angel in the House," which had dominated the Eastern ideas of white women, didn't translate to the women in the West. Being a "lady" made little sense in this rough and dirty life. Even the question of suffrage was different—many Western states had already granted white women the right to vote to pad the population numbers for political representation. The Anglo and Mexican women of Clifton were joined by one goal: to be mothers. Motherhood was a measure of a woman's value. But here, then, the birth rate was terribly low and infant mortality was terribly high. The chemicals in the air and water from the copper companies certainly contributed to both.

town, everything from the stores to the homes to the toll roads. But the union movement that was roiling in the industrialized East and Midwest was slowly making its way to the Southwest, at least for the white workers, and the owners and managers fought to maintain control with every weapon they had, including guns. The Wild West image that still reverberates in popular culture comes largely from this area of the expanding country. The OK Corral and Tombstone are in Arizona; Geronimo was the mighty Apache warrior.

There was a contradiction written into Arizona: the freedom for a man to be whoever he wanted to be in the reinvention of pioneer and cowboy life, and the dream of a thriving business community reliant on the eastern United States and Europe. As the territory inched toward statehood, tension arose as some settlers saw Arizona as the true seat of liberty and of manhood, but who also wanted to be perceived as being as good, as civilized, and as white as the Easterners. Originally Arizona and New Mexico were one large territory, but they split into two under President Abraham Lincoln in 1863. To some extent, this split was a power grab for Electoral College votes and Senate seats which would give this underpopulated area more political clout, and it was also because Arizona felt there were too many Mexicans in New Mexico. Arizonans wanted to be seen as American, and Arizona was admitted to statehood in 1912, the 48th state. The last on the continent.

Another circumstance, then as now, is race. This question of American-ness must be acknowledged as a question of whiteness. In the 1910 United States census, 45 races were recognized, including Irish, Italian, Hebrew (which was a separate category from Jewish), Great Russian, Little Russian, Pole and more. There was a great desire to categorize that went far beyond the Black/white binary that existed in the American South. In New York, the Irish Catholics were among the lowest of the low. They were not considered white in the same way the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants were. They were thought of as dirty, superstitious. They were low. These poor, uneducated people were seen as a scourge. There were outcries about too many immigrants ruining what had once been a great city.

In Arizona, race and racism functioned differently, and at the turn of the century were in a moment of change. The territory didn't have many permanent Mexican residents in the late 19th century. The Mexicans who came to live in the territory, like the immigrants in the East, were looking for work and opportunity. One thing that was different, though, was that the border was permeable then, and the possibility of returning home was different for the Mexicans in the Southwest than for the immigrants who had crossed oceans, or the white settlers who had crossed a continent. Many Mexicans, especially when the railroad came in, were able to visit or even return to the towns they had left. This meant that that white mine owners and settlers felt justified in seeing them as impermanent residents,

Playwright Karen Zacarías considers *The Copper Children* to be something of a "sister play" to *Destiny of Desire*, which was staged at OSF in 2018. Pictured: Ensemble. Photo by Jenny Graham.

non-citizens, not Americans. They were considered half-breed Indians, uneducated, and simple-minded. But as more towns grew, both Anglo and Mexican workers moved their families into Arizona to live with them. The Wild West was giving way to the civilizing influence of women and families, supposedly.

The Mexican workers didn't see themselves as different from these American pioneers, the Anglos. Indeed they had been active participants in pushing back the Native Americans and pushing out the Chinese workers who tried to stay and make lives in these towns after building the railroad. As more Mexicans built permanent lives in the territory and later the state and were legally entitled to voting rights, the more the white settlers and managers felt threatened and worked explicitly to keep the Mexicans at a disadvantage by segregating neighborhoods and workplaces, paying Mexicans far less than Anglo counterparts even though many had more experience and expertise, and many had been in the territory longer.

A sad irony of the story of *The Copper Children* is that the Mexicans were not considered suitable parents because they and their homes were so poor, a situation which the Anglos had created and enforced. A strike in Clifton-Morenci the year before the events of the play led to a significant raise only for the white workers. The Mexicans, along with Romanians, Italians, Poles and others, then staged their own strike. Their attempt to get some economic justice was cut short

Karen Zacarías, one of the most produced contemporary playwrights in the United States. Photo by Snotherly Pictures.

when a flash flood tore through the Mexican part of town, destroying homes and killing several strikers and many women and children. In a way, this sense of American vs. Mexican erased the racial distinctions that were prevalent in the East when the Irish children arrived. If you were of European descent, you were white. Among the mob that wanted the children in Clifton were Italians, Germans, Jews, Serbs and more. Suddenly, they were just white. They had all been immigrants and emigrants, but now they had assimilated to whiteness and all the mythology and power connected with that. They were proud pioneers who had conquered the continent and vanquished the Indians. They were fully American.

And the children had been almost magically transformed as well. They were no longer Irish. They were American.

There are more circumstances, to be sure. And, as we are reminded in this play, the most important circumstance is always the people and the place and time they find themselves in.

Further Reading

Karen Zacarías: Plays One, by Karen Zacarías.

Foundlings on the Frontier, by A. Blake Brophy.

The Great Orphan Abduction, by Linda Gordon.

Brecht on Theatre, by Bertolt Brecht.

The Subversive Karen Zacarías

Karen Zacarías is one of the most produced playwrights in the country, and also one of the hardest to pin down. She has written for all kinds of audiences and in all kinds of styles—theatre for young people, comedy, drama, history, translation and adaptation. She's done it all. If there is one thread tying her work together it is that they all show her huge heart and profound humanity. OSF audiences were treated to her delightful *Destiny of Desire* in 2018, and in some ways, although it is quite different in tone, *The Copper Children* can be seen as a companion piece. Both share the joy Zacarías finds in creating ensemble-based work and her continuing exploration of Brechtian and other techniques to expand and explode the theatricality of the stories.

Director Shariffa Ali.
Photo by Jeremy Tauriac.

This project also brings her a new director in Shariffa Ali, a rising star known for her rigorous and physical style. Both are also activists and immigrants. Zacarías is of Mexican, Lebanese and Danish descent and moved to the U.S. from Mexico when she was a child. Ali is from Kenya and South Africa and has been working in the U.S. since 2013. Almost the entire creative team are immigrants as well. For Zacarías, that is a story of America, and why they are perfect to tell this story from American history. "The team is almost all foreign-born, and yet we all call the United States home. We are new Americans telling an old story about a new America that still resonates today."