Arab–American writer is ambassador for Middle East

By Andrea Shalal-Esa

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Arab–American poet, playwright and scholar Nathalie Handal is a sort of Renaissance woman for the 21st century.

She lives in New York, she's editing two literary anthologies, she's helping to produce a feature film about the poet Gibran Kahlil, and she's founding a new British-based theater company.

Like other Arab–American and Muslim writers, Handal is riding an upsurge in interest in all things Arab and Muslim since the attacks of September 11, 2001.

But it's still an uphill battle for most Arab–American writers and playwrights to get published or produced in mainstream venues, said Handal, 37, whose most recent work is a CD of poetry, "Spell."

Instead, young Arab–Americans are producing their own plays and creating performance spaces for their still largely unknown community, including events such as the New York Arab American Comedy Festival last month.

"It's very much a question of eradicating invisibility and bringing awareness to who we are as Palestinians and Arabs," she said in a telephone interview between performances.
Handal's anthology, "The Poetry of Arab Women," published by Interlink Publishing in 2001, introduced many unknown Arab women poets to a wider audience, and is now used in university classes around the country.

Handal's own poetry as "luscious and sensual," said Naomi Shihab Nye, one of the best-known Palestinian–American writers. "She's an incredible ambassador for the entire Middle East," said Nye.

Michel Moushabeck, who founded Interlink in 1987 to introduce more Arab writers to the U.S. public, said U.S. chain bookstores still don't carry much Arab fiction, but sales are up sharply since 2001, helped largely by Internet sales.

Handal's anthology of poetry has sold over 10,000 copies, a "phenomenal" achievement for a book of poetry, Moushabeck said.

REDEFINING "EAST"

Handal is also one of three editors for another anthology due next fall that redefines the West's view of the East. It includes writers from the Middle East, East, South and Central Asia.

"Although we all had a strong sense of our hyphenated identities, 9/11 kind of made us feel closer to other people of Eastern background, because everybody felt targeted," she said, describing the origin of the collaborative project.

Handal herself defies categorization. She hails from a big Palestinian family from Bethlehem, but was born in Haiti and spent years in the Caribbean, Latin America, the United States and Europe.
She writes in English, but slips fluidly from English to Arabic to French in conversation. Her poetry is also peppered with Spanish words because so much of her family lives in Latin America that it also informs her life and work.

Despite many displacements, Handal says her sense of home is inextricably bound up with her Palestinian identity. She first visited Bethlehem as a teenager, but found everything felt incredibly familiar. "When I first went, everything made sense to me about who I was," she said.

Over the years, she has traveled to Bethlehem many times, seeing conditions deteriorate, particularly since the construction of the controversial wall between Israel and the West Bank.

Handal is also still grieving women and children killed during this summer's Israeli–Lebanese war.

"There's a side of me that just feels discouraged. At the same time, coming from where I come from, it's just sort of innate that we're going to rise above it," she said.