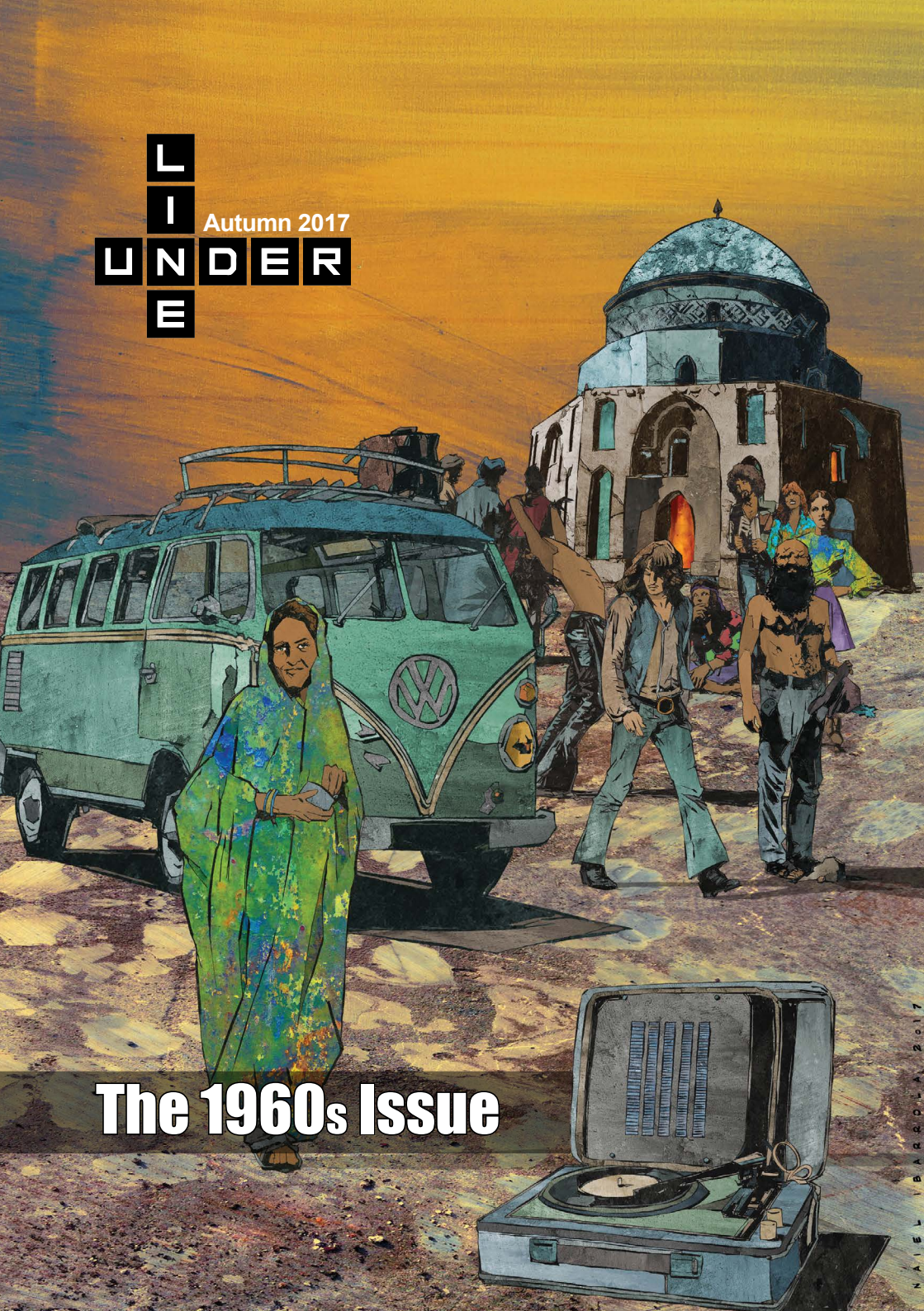
LINE UNDER

Autumn 2017



The 1960s Issue

NAIEL IBARRA 2017

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Editorial

The Swinging Sixties – a period of cultural change characterised by optimism, hedonism and extraordinary artistic creativity – was not only a British phenomenon…

Before elaborating any further, allow me to share the good news: Underline, the online arts journal of the British Council Iran, is now a proper quarterly e-magazine, available both as a free download and for online browsing. We believe the magazine format can give greater coherence to the stories we want to tell.

The articles in this issue are themed around the changing culture of the 1960s – the happiest (and hippest) note struck for UK-Iran cultural relations.

Following the arrival into Iran of new British cultural exports – chiefly cinema, music, theatre productions and literary translations – the scepticism of the post-Coup years temporarily dissolved. Iran was a country striving to become revitalised and modern. Iranians were not content to be mere passive recipients of these new trends. They adapted, transformed and reinterpreted that which captivated them from abroad and made their own cultural exports during this significant period of transition.

This issue of Underline explores the stories behind this mutual interest and exchange between Iran and the UK in the 1960s, in six essays penned by experts in a variety of artistic fields. In addition, Spanish artist Naiel Ibarrola has designed and painted the vibrant, psychedelic cover of the first issue and has also illustrated the articles.

After diving deep into the world of Beatlemania, James Hadley Chase, Gunga Din and the Shiraz Arts Festival, the magazine moves on to look at current events. Our interview section features conversations with three key contemporary Iranian artists who have gained international recognition. All were interviewed to coincide with presentations of their works in the UK.

Iran's cultural interests in the UK in the 1960s were of course part of a larger project, that of the country's pre-revolutionary westernisation. In retrospect, however, one can detect a genuine impact whose effects are still evident in spite of drastic socio-political changes in Iran within the last half-century. In this issue of Underline, the shared inspiration that was felt among artists in both countries as a result of developments in the 1960s is more clearly revealed. The ways in which such relations might be productively re-engaged and extended today might also become more clear.

Ehsan Khoshbakht

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Stages of Exchange: Shaping modern theatre in Iran

By Nasim Ahmadpour Samani

Collaborations between theatre artists in the UK and Iran throughout the 1960s helped to inaugurate distinctively modern forms of performance and writing in Iran, with innovative productions brought to new audiences.

Some scholars trace the history of theatre in Iran back to ancient times.All agree, however, that contemporary styles of theatre in Iran can be more strongly connected to a much more recent past. Modern theatre in Iran is not a product of, or a continuation of, traditional and ritual forms of theatre that have a long history. Rather, the inception of modern theatre occurred at the time of the building of the Tekyeh Dowlat in 1870, the first official venue for performing theatre, modelled on the Royal Albert Hall in London. This design scheme was brought back to Iran by Naser al-Din Shah, following his travels in Europe between 1873 and 1889. Even though the function of the Tekyeh Dowlat became limited to the staging of traditional *ta'ziyah* religious plays – due to the opposition of traditional groups to the art of theatre – the very idea of creating the first official venue for performing theatre in its modern forms is owed to Naser al-Din Shah's visit to London.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that the first native Iranians who were sent abroad for education went to London in 1815. Mirza


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Saleh Tabrizi was one of these individuals and he mentions in his travelogue William Shakespeare and performances of his plays. The experiences of this group were certainly instrumental in the establishment of the Dar al-Funun (the first modern college in Iran) and its playhouse and the start of the translation of Shakespeare's works. Until the final years of the reign of Nasir al-Din Shah, only the works of Molière were translated into Persian, but then it was the turn of Shakespeare. In the 1960s, the pace of the translation of Shakespeare's works accelerated in Iran. Mention ought to be made of *OtHello* (trans. M. E. Behazin, 1961), *King Lear* (Javad Peyman, 1961), *Hamlet* (Masoud Farzad, 1963), *Richard II* (Reza Baraheni, 1964), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Masoud Farzad, 1963), Hamlet (M. E. Behazin, 1965), *Romeo and Juliet* (Ala al-Din Pazargadi, 1965) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (Ala al-Din Pazargadi, 1965).

The huge number of translations of works by Western authors, primarily those of Shakespeare in the 1960s, released playwriting from the grips of its customary and traditional forms – to the extent that these same translations could be considered as the foundations of Iran's modern theatre in the Western style with its unique formal qualities.

Also, in 1958, Iran's National Organisation of Ballet was established which became one of the most reputable and internationally acclaimed Iranian art organisations, located in the Roudaki Hall. More than half of the dancers and conductors of the National Ballet Organisation of Iran were non-Iranian and of different nationalities, among whom the British dancer Margot Fonteyn produced and performed exclusively for the Roudaki Hall. The National Ballet Organisation of Iran frequently performed at official events hosted by the Iranian government, in the presence of senior and high profile figures like Queen Elizabeth.

In 1965 Robert de Warren, who was trained at the Royal Ballet School in the UK and was one of its key members for six years, was sent to Iran by the Royal Ballet to teach and promote the art form. He was the artistic director of the National Ballet of Iran between 1966 and 1971 before leaving to create the National Folklore Organisation of Iran. This organisation was established to collect, disseminate and propagate the folk songs and dances of Iran and was considered a kind of cultural ambassador for Iran.

It was in the same decade that Abdollah Nazemi created the Pars National Ballet, in 1966, the same year that the National Television Network was established, offering the support of a new medium. Nazemi produced more than 240 classical and modern ballets based on Iran's folk songs and indigenous dances. He performed most of them in various locations, including the Birjandi dance in London's Hyde Park.

Among the other notable events that took place between 1967 and 1978, was the Shiraz Festival of Arts. The purpose of the festival was to connect the art of the East with that of the West by providing an opportunity to showcase the latest achievements of the most highly regarded artists of the world in Iran.

In 1970, the British director Peter Brook established the International Centre for Theatre Research (CIRT) in France. In the spring of 1970, he travelled to Iran for the first time as part of his theatrical research for this centre. In the same year, he saw the *ta'ziyeh* of *Tiflan-i Muslim* in a village near Nishabour in Khorasan and was deeply impressed by it. The subsequent screening of his films as part of the fourth edition of the Arts Festival in the autumn of the same year provided an opportunity for him to present his *Orghast* project as a work in progress.

Brook returned to Iran in 1971 to rehearse and stage *Orghast*. He selected a cast of Iranian actors following interviews conducted at the Theatre House building and started rehearsing with the actors in the Ferdows Garden in Tehran. Brook directed in collaboration with Arby Ovanessian, Andrei Serban and Geoffrey Reeves. *Orghast I* was based on *The Persians* by Aeschylus while *Orghast II* was based on *Prometheus* by Sophocles. *Orghast I* was performed in the Persepolis after sunset and *Orghast II* was performed in Naqsh-e Rustam at sunrise. The script for the play was experimentally prepared by the British poet and author Ted Hughes. The play had no words and was developed on the basis of common sounds and voices between different languages. The performance of the play at an ancient venue with a group of twenty-five actors of different nationalities at an unusual time of day and in an unusual space became the foundation for subsequent works by Brook, *Conference of the Birds* and *The Mahabharata*.

One of the other accomplishments of the Shiraz Arts Festival in the area of theatre was the export of Iran's contemporary drama. The event became a focal point where a playwright such as Abbas Nalbandian could be discovered, with his play *A deep, big and new research about fossils of 25th genealogy period, or 20th, or any other period, there is no difference*. Arby Ovanessian directed this play and staged it at the 1968 Shiraz Arts Festival. Commissioned by Peter Brook, it was then introduced to Anthony Page, a director at London's Royal Court, where it was performed two years later in 1970. This marked the first time that an Iranian play was performed, in Persian, in the history of British theatre.

A number of Iranian students from art schools in Britain returned to Iran during these years, each of them taking up executive, arts or managerial positions. Among them was Khalil Movahhed Dilmaghami who became the dean of a school of fine arts, and Malek Jahan Khazaei who returned to Iran after serving as stage and costume designer on plays by Anthony Page, Clifford Williams and Lindsay Anderson at the Royal Court.

With a detailed examination of the 1960s, one could undoubtedly uncover many more instances of interaction between the theatres of Iran and Britain. Compared with the Reformation years of the 1990s, the 1960s were probably not the richest years of Iranian-British relations in the theatre – but many of the first artistic exchanges occurred during this period and ensured that Britain would become a permanent part of Iran's contemporary history of theatre. ■

‘Oh, I believe in yesterday’: The influence of British rock music in 1960s Iran

By Hossein Assaran
(Translated by Philip Grant)

A wave of British rock and roll bands toured Iran in the 1960s, inspiring legions of young Iranians to form groups of their own. The history of this period of cross-cultural influence provides a window onto a society very much different from today.

In the film *The Foreign Bride* (Nosratollah Vahdat, 1964), the character Hossein ‘the Braker’, a symbol of traditional Iranian manhood, takes a young European woman to a nightclub.[1] She is lost in Tehran, and Hossein wants to entertain her. At the club an Iranian band, led by the singer Zia, play a few rock songs with both Persian and foreign lyrics, and the young European woman is reminded of nights she spent in her own country. She dances with the young Iranians gathered there and is happy again.

These scenes from *The Foreign Bride* should be considered examples of a Tehran renewed and revived after the coup d’état of 19th August 1953. The state’s policy was to foster the growth of an urban middle class from which it would draw support. For some, conspicuous consumption was the order of the day, and its consequence

was as striking – namely, the division of Tehran into the prosperous 'upper city' and the less well-off 'lower city'. In this setting, among the various indicators of modern life were the new necessities of urban living: the employees' clubs, the bars and restaurants that sprang up all over the place. As the number of leisure sites increased in Tehran and in some other Iranian cities, a large number of bands from Britain and other European countries made their way to Iran, where they became the musical centrepieces of many an event and were contracted to play at these modern venues, often staying in Iran for as long as a year.

When a need for Iranian pop songs arose, during their downtime these bands also took on the task of arranging and composing Iranian tunes for the radio. Thus it was that they gradually made Iranian music familiar with homophony and polyphony, counterpoint and harmony.

A 45rpm single by O'joobe-ha [The Marvels] released by Moulin Rouge Records in Tehran. The text at the top of the cover reads "The English at your disposal" which doesn't make any sense at all!

Thus it was too that on the records of that fleeting age people could read things like 'By Arvin Moureh's Orchestra' or 'Arranged by Sebastian's Orchestra'.[2] These were two songwriters and bandleaders, both of whom had come to Tehran to perform.

In the mid-1960s, thanks to political developments and rising state revenues, what counted as culture began to change and institutions active in this area could take into account the changing tastes of urban publics. In Tehran and other big cities nightspots sprang up in many a nook and cranny, and most of these made their money from their sound systems: they were 'discothèques', with DJs playing Western records.

In Britain rock and roll was flourishing; the Beatles were the most loved of groups, and urban society in Iran quickly found itself drawn to this new musical culture. Iran became a regular stop for Western bands on tour and over time these

Tak Khalha, or The Aces, one of the various bands that emerged after the British 1960s rock invasion.

A different instrumentation: The Iranian rock band Piccolo with Parviz Mansouri, Armik, Ounik and Georges.

The Rebels are Homayoun Jamali, Siavash Ghomeishi, Kambiz Moein-Azad, Varik Mirza-Beigian

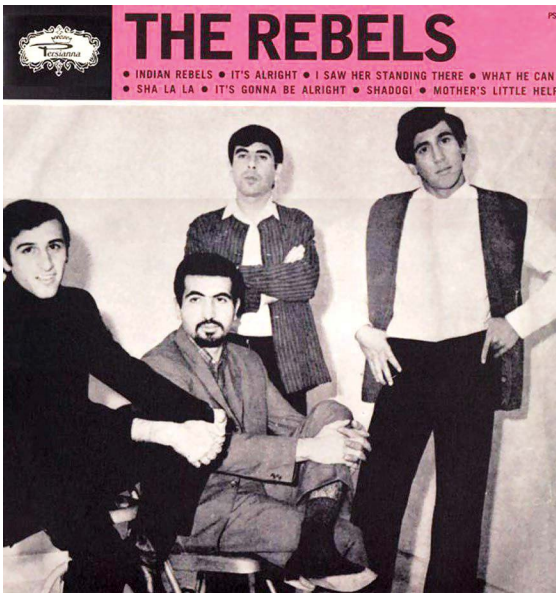
became greater in number and visits lasted for longer. These rock bands tended to be based on various types of guitar (acoustic, bass, electric), accompanied by drums and keyboards, and as such did not have a great deal in common with the various types of Iranian band that had existed until then. This distinguishing feature soon attracted young Iranians interested in music, and in short order Iranian non-classical music groups adopted this form.

Most people taking music lessons learned these instruments, and shops selling modern Western instruments changed the face of a number of Tehran streets, including Shah St and Zhaleh Junction.[3] The result of rock and roll loving teenagers getting together was the formation of a good number of Iranian rock bands. The influence of British groups was clear not just in their compositions but in the very language of the names they chose, such as Black Cats, Golden Ring, Hard Stones, Tehran Boys, Big Boys, Pass Makers, Plaquette, Piccolo, Tigers, Flowers, and Rebels. Cover versions of British bands' songs aside, there was also a great deal of similarity between their own songs and those produced by the British groups of the day, including The Animals, The Beatles, and The Rolling Stones. For example, the song 'Beware' (its title was in English) by the group O'joobe-ha (The Marvels) bears a strong resemblance to the songs of The Rolling Stones.

The main difference between these new bands and their predecessors was that they were not based on a singer as focal point. Rather, just like British rock bands, they were made up of four or five musicians who usually played the guitar or the drums, with all the band members helping to write songs and joining in with singing them. These musicians had two ways of learning the latest songs put out by their British counterparts. Either they learned directly from them when they were invited on tour to Iran and performed them there, or they recorded them from various radio stations, and after a few practice sessions were able to perform them themselves in Tehran not long after they had first come out in Britain. After this had become the case, National Iranian Radio launched a show called Jazz Music presented by Fereidoun Farhat, on which he played and analysed the latest rock hits.

One of the most important things to happen as part of this process was the replacement of DJs with live bands. A number of nightclubs, including Cuccini, Ice Palace, Labyrinthe, Kakouleh, and Saloot, started to host rock bands instead of the discothèque format they had relied on until then. These bands were both Iranian and foreign; there was a keen rivalry between them, and each found its own particular group of enthusiastic fans. Such was the importance and warm public welcome for these groups that by the late

Four singles packaged as one album by The Rebels. Long play records were not yet that popular.



1960s covering foreign songs and not singing in Persian had become a key criterion for judging a song; an absolute advantage, in fact. Gradually Iranian music acquired its own personality, and it did so without any financial support from official institutions and despite the power and influence of the national radio stations and the songs produced by the official, state system. Most performances were in English and only sometimes Persian; and in the design of record sleeves the example of Western groups was also paramount, for instance in the band photos, where all members were dressed in the same way.

After the 1964 Birmingham music festival, a number of glitzy and one-off festivals involving both Iranian and foreign groups were held in Tehran. The sight of the 25,000 seat Amjadiyyeh stadium filled with spectators is one of the most memorable images of the Tehran of the 1960s, and can also be considered a sign of renewal and of the success of the Pahlavi state in implementing its policies aiming to distinguish Iran from the other countries in the region through the movement toward the 'Great Civilisation'. A procession of various Iranian groups came to perform one after the other in this event, including The Marvels, Black Cats, The Rebels, Tak Khalha (The Stars), and Gonahkaran (The Sinners).

The influence of the European rock bands who performed in Iran cannot be limited simply to the effects of the gigs they played. Musicians from most of these groups, of various nationalities, stayed in Iran, thanks to the attractions of the climate and the booming job market for music, where they shared their accomplishments and experience as performers with novice Iranian musicians eager to learn new tricks. Moreover, when they left Iran they often sold their instruments to these novice Iranian musicians. As these instruments were usually of the best and latest kind, the Iranians were able to familiarise themselves with their specific features, leading to an improvement in the quality of their performances.

By the late 1960s, Western music had more influence in Iran than ever before; a large number of trained musicians existed who were not dependent on the organs of the state, whether National Radio and Television or the Ministry of Culture and Art. Private recording studios had been established, and the influence of rock on Iranian music began to go beyond just performance styles, record sleeve design, or the attire and names of bands. British rock groups also influenced the insertion of hidden protest into the content of songs. One example was Farhad Mehrad, singer of the successful group Black Cats, who in February 1969 performed for an hour on television in London, and who in the late sixties and early seventies, after singing songs such as 'Reza the Biker' and 'Friday', became one of the first protest singers in the history of Iranian music.

The Iranian rock band The Marvels in action. The text at the top of the sleeve reads: "If you don't know the name of these bands, today's youngsters will look at you as backward and reactionary!"

Earlier in the 1960s Iranian rock groups had been characterised more by their imitation of the forms and behaviour distinctive to Western rock bands than by their artistic and creative qualities. However the renewed songwriting of Iran at the end of the 1960s, having absorbed the lessons of the West when it came to form and content, went beyond mere imitation. A new chapter began, one consistent with the turbulent political and social conditions of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and Iranian music found a new language. By the 1970s it could compare with the best in the world, both when it came to the aesthetics of the music itself and when it came to the quality of performances and recordings. Some of this music production can reasonably be grouped with the other progressive art forms of the day: poetry, prose writing, theatre, the plastic arts and cinema. The songwriting of the 1970s completed this circle. ■

Notes:

1- In Persian, 'Hossein Tormozi', because, as he explains at the beginning of the film from behind the wheel of his taxi, his friends say his foot is always on the brake (tormoz).

2- No more information could be found regarding these two artists. It is not certain what the first name should be, although the composer seems to have written songs for Amir Mehrpouya. One suggestion is Irvine Moore, but no further references have been located.

3- The first street name is Khiyaban-e Jomhuri in the text. Its pre-revolutionary name is used here. After the revolution, its name was changed to Islamic Republic St. I have translated 'se-rah-e zhaleh' as Zhaleh Junction.

Dead-End of a Career: Mehdi Mirsamadzadeh's crime thrillers

By Ramin S. Khanjani

Mehdi Mirsamadzadeh's film adaptations of the crime novels of British author James Hadley Chase mark a distinctive period in Iranian genre cinema, but despite the fascinating history they reveal to us today, the director's career never recovered from their commercial reception.

Iranian cinema in the early 1960s is characterised by a boom in crime dramas and thrillers – a genre almost alien to Iranian literary and artistic traditions – thanks to the pioneering efforts of filmmaker Samuel Khachikian, dubbed the 'Iranian Hitchcock'. The sudden popularity of such films could be explained by a combination of factors: the novelty of the genre, its exotic flavour, the excitement of peering into a world of darkness, along with the fevered dynamism and exuberantly expressive style of Khachikian's crime films.

Within the literary market, a fascination among Iranians for the murkier aspects of society was manifested in the publication of translated crime novels starting in the early 1950s and prospering through to the 1979 revolution. US writer Mickey Spillane's 'Mike' Hammer character and the works of British author James Hadley Chase

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became very popular, with the highest number of translated novels. Their names virtually became brands, even to the extent that the concoctions of some Iranian writers (purported translators) were attributed to these authors. No wonder then, that as crime films became all the rage, Iranian cinema grasped the opportunity to cash in on this already established fanbase. In the process, Chase's name became integral to this short-lived trend unlike no other writer's, with two of his novels being made into films back to back by the same director.

These two films, *Spider's Web* (*Taar-e Anakaboot*, 1963) and *Dead-End* (*Bonbast*, 1964), are among the few pictures from the period that announce that they are adaptations, even if only by crediting the novelist. This might be perceived as a publicity stunt, and perhaps also a gesture on the part of its IDHEC educated director, Mehdi Mirsamadzadeh to signal his professionalism and claim a certain quality for his work. In the 1950s, western crime novels were in the main viewed as downmarket publications due to abysmal translations. It was only in the early 1960s – around the time when the popularity of Iranian crime films was at its peak – that seasoned and skilled translators turned to this literary genre and presented

The poster for Dead-End whose "foreign title" is given as Impasse.

reliable and accurate Farsi translations of crime novels. Mirsamadzadeh, however, was familiar with Chase's novels through French translations published under the reputable *Serie Noir* imprint and so had no hesitation about suggesting the novels for adaptation.[1] However, the production of neither of these two films was authorised by the writer or original publisher, as the copyright laws protecting the rights of non-Iranian creators was not – and still has not been – adopted within Iran, thus remaining the least concern for Iranian producers.

Compared to many other Iranian filmmakers of that period, including the resourceful Khachikian, Mirsamadzadeh had a more attractive resume, having studied filmmaking in France.[2] His first work for Iranian cinema came in the shape of a love rivalry drama, which despite its interest – the rather fresh depiction of a close-knit community of lumberjacks – by and large failed to garner critical appreciation. For his second feature, *Spider's Web*, Mirsamadzadeh took his first stab at filming one of Chase's novels. Adapted from *But a Short Time to Live*, the film is based on a similar premise, that of a photographer who develops a growing fascination with a woman from a dubious background. The film is, however, marred by both technical ineptitude and a humdrum script. Apparently the production of the film did not proceed according to the director's wishes.[3]

By and large the film's narrative seems to lose its suspense and mystery in favour of melodrama. In order to communicate the characters' feelings and thoughts, the director resorts to the glib device of having them express themselves through dialogue, the drabness of which comes further to fore in the absence of any visually stimulating content. As a result, the purported conflicted feelings of the photographer (played by future mainstream director and superstar, Iraj Ghaderi) towards the woman can hardly be related to. The photographer's character indeed bears a notable similarity to filmfarsi protagonists; he follows the familiar trope of acting as the gallant saviour of a fallen woman by offering her the 'blessing' of a family life. [4]

The inability of *Spider's Web* to capture the anticipated menace of the underworld – likened by the photographer to the titular 'spider's web' – further undermines its appeal. One therefore would wonder if the real threat doesn't lie in the photographer's helpless fascination with the lady, Fariba (meaning 'beguiling'), that entraps him within a relationship with her, in the dim hope of her reform. But the lack of adequate character development hampers this essential dimension of the story. It also limits the potential for a somewhat different presentation of a *femme fatale* character. The narrative clearly does not intend to vilify Fariba, but rather seeks to present her as a victim. But the awkward script fails to justify her vagaries and instead establishes her as a compulsive, petty criminal, who with a childish obstinacy rejects the prospect of settling into a peaceful, even if modest, domestic space.

Chase earned a reputation for writing novels set in the Untied States without having visited the country, hence creating a fictional set-up of sorts. This was not the case with the source novel for *Spider's Web* which grounds its narrative in the sordid and shady corners of post-war London. Yet for the Iranian adaptation, Mirsamadzadeh seems to have followed Chase's usual model of creating a fictitious world. In *Spider's Web*, markers of locality are few and far between, indicating little attempt on the director's part to adapt the story to a wholly different country. Remarkably the film opens with the image of a jukebox in a western style restaurant. Also worthy of note is the main dancing scene in the film, which unlike many similar, almost obligatory, scenes in Iranian films of the period features rock 'n' roll music and singing in English.[5]

Another element that adds to the exotic and unfamiliar quality of *Spider's Web* is Fariba's blonde hair, which corresponds to one formula within Iranian crime films, popularised by Khachikian's *Midnight Cry* (*Faryad-e Nimeshab*, 1960). Seduction incarnate, the blonde *femmes fatale* of Iranian films associated their risqué behaviour with some non-native feature, which together apparently enthralled Iranian spectators, in the same way as it did those women's victims in the films themselves.[6]

In his next adaptation of a Chase novel, *Dead-End,* Mirsamadzadeh pushes this formula further by setting the first encounter between the blonde seductress and Iraj, the male lead (again played by Iraj Ghaderi) in Paris, thereby adding another layer to her foreignness. Unlike the halfway sympathetic portrayal of the seductress in the earlier film, in *Dead-End* Mirsamadzadeh opts to present a typical *femme fatale* whose soul is fully tainted with avarice – this time played by Parvin Ghaffari, the female star of *Midnight Cry* who carved out a short-lived career with this persona.[7]

Dead-End is based on *Just Another Sucker* which a decade later became the subject of another Iranian adaptation by Khachikian.[8] In its overarching narrative (a man recently released from prison is lured into a plan to extort money) the film remains faithful to the novel. Unlike Khachikian's later version, it utilises the same narrative device of involving the protagonist as both a participant in the crime and an assistant to the investigation. This alone helped the director to infuse suspense into his film more effectively than in *Spider's Web*. What is added is the introductory background story in Paris, which seems like the director's personal touch and does not mesh well with the rest. Mirsamadzadeh's adherence to the trappings of noir here goes as far as using a voice-over.

A significant change introduced to Chase's story is the explanation for the protagonist's imprisonment. In *Dead-End* Iraj is sentenced to jail simply because of a reckless act of drunk

driving that led to an accident. As with the Paris sequence, the nature of the accident doesn't add psychological complexity to the character. Rather it strips away his literary counterpart's experience of losing his moral compass, when acting upon his principles lands him in jail. Therefore his motivation to take the bait is reduced to a financial one.

On the surface, *Dead-End* presents more visible signs of the contemporary context in which the film was made, but the characters and their relationships barely respond to this context. One brief scene sees Iraj witnessing a traditional street performance as he is leaving prison, yet it has no real function. This time around the dance scene is orchestrated in a familiar fashion – belly dancing in a cabaret – but is equally redundant. The genre hybridity characteristic of old Iranian films finds an expression in *Dead-End* through the presence of two comic characters who, notwithstanding their incongruous nature, emerge as witnesses and therefore become integral to the film.[9]

The commercial flop of *Dead-End* precipitated the decline of Mirsamadzadeh's career and his subsequent work was bereft of the artistic aspirations of his first three pictures. Mirsamadzadeh's crime films reflect their origins in western literature perhaps more openly than other Iranian crime films of the 1960s. As such, they express a desire to level out cultural differences and yet unwittingly frustrate this attempt by keeping apart their fictional worlds and the social realities that underpin them. Though they fall short of adequately doing justice to Chase's original novels and lack the flair of Khachikian's thrillers, *Spider's Web* and *Dead-End* still exemplify a different, less stylistically ambitious approach to genre in early Iranian crime films and deserve closer attention in any historical investigation of the difficulties of constructing a vibrant, local genre cinema. ■

Notes:

1- Alireza Mahmoodi, 'Dastan-e Farangi, Film-e Farsi' ('Western fiction, Iranian film'), *Film Yearbook* 22 (2012), p. 158.

2- Curiously, he is often credited in his films as 'Engineer Mirsamadzadeh' – a sign of the pervasive fascination with using titles, irrespective of context.

3- Gholam Heydari, 'Khaterat va Khatarat-e film-bardaran-e Sinamaye Iran' ('The Challenges Faced by Iranian Cinematographers: Past & Present') (Tehran: Cultural Research Bureau, 1997), p. 240.

4- Filmfarsi was the Iranian mainstream cinema of the period.

5- To contribute to the exotic flavour of this scene, the singer can be heard talking Farsi with a feigned foreign accent after the performance.

6- Given that the majority of Iranians are not fair-haired. See also Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2006, p102

7- She was also rumoured to be a paramour to Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Shah of Iran.

8- Curiously, Khachikian made no mention of the source novel in the credits of this film, titled *Agitation* (*Ezterab*, 1976).

9- Interestingly, a year later both actors would be cast by Samuel Khachikian for the purposes of comic relief, appearing together in his wacky mystery film *Delirium* (1965).

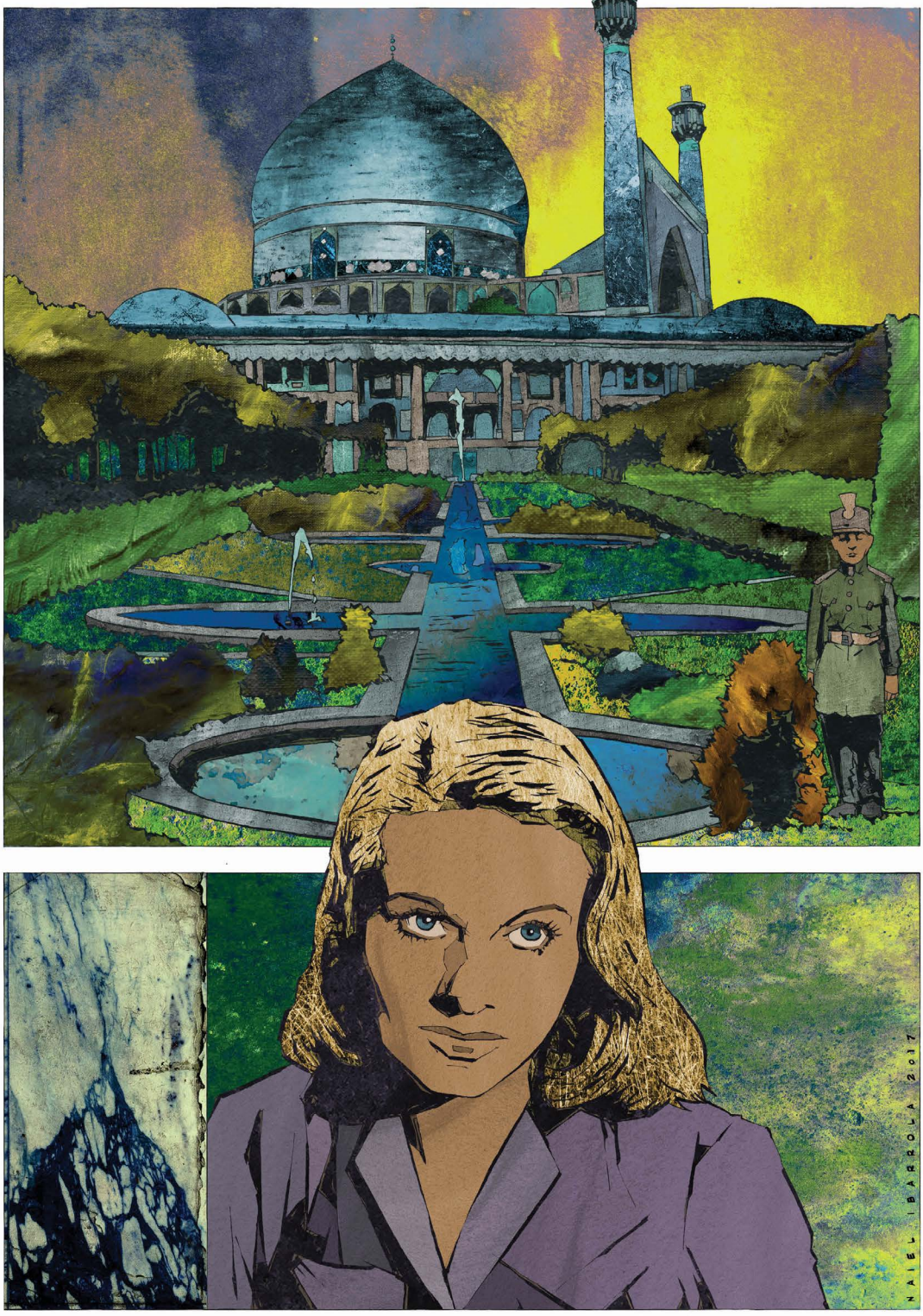
Ann Todd's Visions of Persia

By Pamela Hutchinson

In the 1960s the English actress and film-maker Ann Todd saw in Iran a world of enchantment and myth – just as modernisation and western influences were bringing about social and political turbulence.

The visits made by actress and film-maker Ann Todd to Iran in the late 1960s were luxurious, even charmed experiences. For her, Iran was Persia – 'I like that name so much better' – and her landscape was palaces and hotels, spectacular sunsets and gardens lit by fairy lights. 'I found only dignity and beauty,' she wrote in her memoir *The Eighth Veil* (1980), which recounts her two visits to the country: the first as a guest of the Foreign Office to secure funding, and the second to shoot a film there. The name of the movie encapsulates both its fantasy plot and Todd's own impression of the country: *A Persian Fairy Tale* (1969).

The story of the film's production begins, as Todd tells it, like a romance. Having made three documentary films, about Nepal, Greece and Egypt, she finds herself at 'a dinner party given by one of the young Roosevelts' (the date must be 1965), seated next to a handsome, mysterious, foreign man in dark glasses. He is later revealed to be the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Iranian ambassador (Ardeshir Zahedi), but she knows neither his name nor nationality when he asks: 'I don't think you have made a film of my country, have you?' He compliments her movie-star smile, but Todd does not consider his approach a romantic conquest, although it appeared that way to at least one onlooker, a 'French lady' who sniffs at the ambassador's gift of books on Iranian history and culture, boasting: '*I* got earrings from the Aspreys'.

As far as Iran itself is concerned, Todd describes the country in purely 'fabulous' terms, with references to the *Arabian Nights*, *Aladdin*, 'a child's fairy story book' and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* ('the cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,/The solemn temples'). Her experiences are 'incredible' and she marvels if 'anything can be called ordinary in Persia'. Remembering her first visit to the Golestan Palace, two years after meeting the ambassador, Todd writes: 'I felt I was really playing *Cinderella* this time … it all looked like a pretty fantastic set up for a film … I was acting, or rather, over-acting a part that I had never played before'.

Having secured a budget from Zahedi, who had by now become foreign secretary, 'Cinderella' returned to Iran in 1968 or 1969 to begin shooting her 31-minute, Eastmancolor film and was immediately granted an audience with royalty. The Empress (Farah Pahlavi) offered her eight-year-old son, the Crown Prince (Reza Pahlavi), as an actor in the film – an arrangement Todd accepted with some trepidation. Appropriately enough, Todd's scenario, a story for children, was a fairy tale of sorts, in which she accompanies four youngsters to Iran. According to a review by Eric Braun in *Films and Filming* (April 1976), their journey begins in London with the group throwing coins into a fountain in Trafalgar Square. Transported by magic to 'Persia' they find engravings in a temple relating the story of a Demon No-Good, who stole the sun and hid it behind a mountain. While the children search for the sun, a young prince (Reza Pahlavi), living on a star, retrieves it with a rocket and restores light to the people below. The children of the world pay tribute to the hero prince, who smiles at the camera from his Peacock Throne in a grand finale. The review praises the photography by Michael Elphick (Todd mentions her appreciation of his work and his support in her account, but not his name) and the deft editing of Gitta Zadek, best known now for her work on *Doctor Who*. Todd says that the look of the film was inspired by traditional Iranian art, the 'famous miniatures' and her cast were dressed in 'transparent coats' and 'Persian trousers' (probably the drawstring *sirwal* type). Even the Prince adhered to Todd's vision of Iranian style – he wore these long trousers at her request, rather than his preferred 'shorts and a blazer'.

Braun's review, while smiling on the film's 'opulent pictorial beauty', distances *A Persian Fairy Tale* from other western-made movies set in the Middle East, because unlike her predecessors, Todd has 'turned to the real thing'. Todd is applauded for finding fantastical

settings in real locations rather than creating fairy-tale décor in a studio. The review commends her 'imaginative look at the Persia of legend and fairy tale leading into the development of the Iran of today'. There is little in Braun's synopsis to suggest that the Iran of 1969 figures prominently in the film, however, beyond perhaps the Prince's final smirk, which 'robs the film of any hint of taking itself, its message, or even its creator, too seriously'.

Todd's specifically western perspective on Iran is revealed in her memoir not just in her allusions to myth and literature, but also in her clear discomfort at seeing women wear the *chador*, and especially at being 'forced' to wear one herself during a visit to a mosque. Perhaps contrarily, she is also surprised by evidence of western habits in the country, by late-1960s Iran intruding on her Persian ideal. She describes her fascination at the sight of a veiled wealthy woman in an airport, incongruously (to Todd) stroking a mass-produced plastic handbag, a fascination that only increases when the robe slips to reveal a mini-skirt and high heels underneath. Her final glimpse of the Crown Prince includes a well-worn symbol of western cultural dominance: 'The last I saw of His Royal Highness was sitting on his own throne sucking Coca Cola through a straw.' As *A Persian Fairy Tale* is unavailable to view, perhaps lost for good like the Peacock Throne recreated within it, we may never know whether Todd incorporated such elements into her film. If it weren't for the mention of 'the Iran of today' in the review, one would assume *A Persian Fairy Tale* ignored the 1960s modernisation/westernisation of the country altogether. Todd refers to the locations as being distant in time as much as geography ('Persepolis, that great city of the past') and her plot concerns a crowned head bringing enlightenment to the world, after all.

Todd was writing her memoir at the end of the 1970s, as the Iranian regime, and the Pahlavi dynasty, was falling:

'It seems tragic what is going on now in that country. I never saw the unhappy, perhaps ugly, things that may have been happening then. I didn't see them perhaps because my story after all was a fairy tale.'

She notes that the film has been released for the second time recently, but will probably not be seen again 'for a long, long time', and determines to leave a copy for her children in her will 'as a relic of the past'. She closes her chapter with those lines from Prospero's speech in *The Tempest*, the ones that conjure 'cloud-capp'd towers and gorgeous palaces' but also reveal the artifice of performance and storytelling, 'the baseless fabric of this vision'. Todd's strategy, with the backing of the foreign office, was to present an enchanted dream of a place rather than the place itself – a vision that was a 'relic of the past' even at the time that it was made. ■

A Voice that Remains: The legacy of Forough Farrokhzad

By Shaahin Pishbin

Fifty years after her death, the poet and filmmaker Forough Farrokhzad remains an inspiring, iconoclastic figure for many – but does her countercultural image still obscure the true complexity of her creative gifts?

I bury my hands in the garden
I will grow – I know, I know, I know
And swallows will lay eggs
In the grooves of my ink stained fingers.' [1]

The 13th of February 2017 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the death of the Persian language's most celebrated woman poet, Forough Farrokhzad (1935–1967). Renowned for the candour of her verse and the force of her spirit, Farrokhzad's life was nevertheless cut tragically short. She died as a result of a car accident at the age of 32. What's remarkable to observe, half a century after her passing, is how her poetic voice has neither waned nor stagnated, but reverberates ever more profoundly with audiences new and old. What underpins the extraordinary legacy of this cultural icon?

In her life as in her work, Farrokhzad showed little deference to the conservative sensibilities of her era, meaning that for


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many, the memory of Forough the poet has been almost irreversibly intertwined with that of Forough the iconoclast. An outspoken, female divorcee writing candid poetry from an unabashedly feminine perspective – she became (and continues to be) a countercultural icon, earning her admirers and detractors often equal in fervour.

Consequently, Farrokhzad shares in the fate of many rebellious artistic and political figures who die before their time: a hotly contested and frequently distorted legacy, used as a prop to tell other people's stories. Iran's complicated relationship with what it means to be 'modern' has seen Farrokhzad often reduced to what she is alleged to represent, obscuring the true complexity of her creative gifts.

In spite of (and perhaps, in part, because of) the distaste felt by the cultural establishment of post-revolutionary Iran towards Farrokhzad (with much of her poetry being censored), she remains as culturally relevant as ever. Such is Farrokhzad's tenacity in the popular memory that establishment figures – among them even the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei himself – have felt compelled to chime in on the question of her legacy, criticising some for praising Farrokhzad in order to belittle a more traditional Iranian women poet, Parvin E'tesami.[2] Denouncements like this have only reinforced Farrokhzad's subversive appeal. As is common with Persian literature's greatest heroes, Farrokhzad's grave attracts many visitors, mostly young women coming to pay their respects. Few, if any, modern poets draw as many pilgrims.

Outside Iran, too, Farrokhzad remains an important figure for thousands of Iranians living in the diaspora. For some, Farrokhzad's perceived self-empowerment and rejection of tradition recall to their minds Iran in the 1950s and 1960s, perhaps with rose-tinted glasses. For others, Farrokhzad's work powerfully reasserts the often marginalised or totally erased voice of Iranian women. As the poet and academic Persis Karim has written, Farrokhzad's poetry challenges 'the often singularized narrative of women's oppression', counteracting 'the plethora of negative media representations of contemporary Iranian life'.[3]

Regardless of where and to what extent one locates Farrokhzad in the conflicts between 'tradition' and 'modernity', or in the struggle of Middle Eastern women to speak for themselves and be heard, the more abstract aspects her aesthetic legacy should not be underestimated or sidelined. Farrokhzad's free verse poetry and short documentary film *The House is Black* (*Khaneh siya ast,* 1963) were groundbreaking, sophisticated contributions to the visual and literary arts of the Persian-speaking world. Her ability to create memorable, resonant, and above all human images with her words has inspired many creative artists in the decades since her death. Our understanding of Farrokhzad's

significance would be impoverished if we chose not to explore the richly imaginative territories unlocked through her innovative use of the Persian language.

Iranian artists across the world have done just that, channelling Farrokhzad into new art forms and settings. The US-based Iranian visual artist and filmmaker Shirin Neshat is one of the most notable examples of a contemporary artist drawing inspiration from Farrokhzad, making use of her poetry in her own photographs and films.[4]

The resonant succinctness of Farrokhzad's distinctive turn of phrase is another key factor in her sustained acclaim. An abstract proverbial quality found in her later poetry in particular lends itself to continued artistic interpretation. So when the late, distinguished Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami took the title of a Farrokhzad poem for his celebrated film *The Wind Will Carry Us* (*Baad mara khahad bord*, 1999), he not only made reference to an image familiar to Iranian readers, but reinvigorated Farrokhzad's figurative language for new generations and international audiences. British-Iranian composer Soosan Lolavar is yet another example of an artist taking Farrokhzad's poetry as a point of departure and inspiration, in her recent five-piece movement, *Only Sound Remains* (drawing on lines from a Farrokhzad poem of the same name).

The cover of the prestigious Ferdowsi magazine following Forough's tragic death in which she is called a "martyred poetess".

Even though more Iranian women are writing poetry now than ever before, the influence of Farrokhzad's verse on these contemporary poets hasn't received much attention. Elsewhere, I have explored the importance of Farrokhzad for two young poets writing in the modernist tradition today, in terms of their praxis as well as their attitude towards being a poet.[5] For both – and many others – Farrokhzad's disruptive and independent character was as exemplary as her poetry. Sara Mohammadi Ardehali, who has published four collections of verse, explained to me how Farrokhzad paved the way for other women to write sincere, expressive verse:

"Forough, because of extremists, because she spoke about her feelings, and about love, was rejected by society, she had a hard life, and people cursed her. So when I started writing seriously, I had to ask myself, Sara, if you also want to write honestly and sincerely, society will reject you – do you want to do this or not? And I decided that yes, I wanted to. So in this way, in terms of a [woman] poet's position in society, Forough spoke to me. Her biography, her life spoke to me."[6]

Stylistically, too, Ardehali owes a debt to Farrokhzad. Take the poem 'Night Ambush' ('Shabikhun'):

'Seven times
I wash
The glasses and
The plates and
The pots
How exciting this night is.'[7]

Laconic, embittered and sarcastic, the short poem recalls Farrokhzad's wry humour and sense of domestic frustration (see for example the famous poem 'Wind-up Doll' ('Arusak-e Kuki') in which Farrokhzad likens a woman's domestic life to that of an automated figurine, ending with a similarly sarcastic declaration: '*Oh, I'm so lucky!*')

Forough Farrokhzad would have celebrated her 82nd birthday this year. We cannot know how her craft would have evolved or how she might have shaped her own legacy. What's clear is that, in spite of the hostility she faced in her own lifetime and the attempts by some to marginalise her since then – or narrowly appropriate her memory for their own purposes – her voice remains as influential and affecting as ever. The extent of the creative inheritance she left has yet to be fully determined or appreciated, but the love with which her poems are still read and the creativity they continue to inspire has ensured her once lonely voice rings defiantly in the Persian literary canon. ■

Notes:

1- From the poem 'Another Birth' ('Tavallodi Digar'). Author's translation.

2- See http://www.mehrnews.com/news/2369009/

3- See Persis Karim, 'Re-Writing Forugh: Writers, Intellectuals, Artists and Farrokhzad's Legacy in the Iranian Diaspora' in Forugh Farrokhzad, Poet of Modern Iran : Iconic Woman and Feminine Pioneer of New Persian Poetry, by Dominic Parviz Brookshaw and Nasrin Rahimieh (eds) (London: I B Tauris, 2010), p. 185. Karim also points to Farrokhzad and renewed interest in her work as a symbolic rebuttal of 'New Orientalist' tendencies among some transnational Iranian creative artists, such as Azar Nafisi.

4- For more on Farrokhzad's legacy in disasporic art, see Jasmin Darznik, 'Forough Goes West: The Legacy of Forough Farrokhzad in Iranian Diasporic Art and Literature' in Journal of Middle East Women's Studies, vol. 6, no. 1 (2010), pp. 103–16.

5- See https://www.iranmag.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/1.4.english-section-pishbin-iran-namag-3.pdf

6- Ardehali's comments echo Farrokhzad's own words on the importance of writing authentically: 'I believe in being a poet in all moments of life. Being a poet means being human. I know some poets whose daily behavior has nothing to do with their poetry. In other words, they are only poets when they write poetry. Then it is finished and they turn into greedy, indulgent, oppressive, shortsighted, miserable, and envious people. Well, I cannot believe their poems.' (Source: http://www.forughfarrokhzad.org/collectedworks/collectedworks4.htm)

7- See Sara Mohammadi Ardehali, Barāye Sang-ha [For the Stones]. 1st ed. (Tehran: Cheshmeh, 2011), p. 30.

And Adam Wept Aloud for His Children

By Vahid Hosseini Irani
(Translated by Philip Grant)

In 1965, the novel No Heaven for Gunga Din caused a stir when it was published in the UK. Little known today, it draws on the remarkable life of its author Ali Mirdrekvandi, an autodidact and labourer who experienced firsthand the Allied occupation of Iran.

At sunset on the first night of the seventh month, the officers continued their march under Heaven along the 'Milky Way'. At their head marched their commanding officer, General Burke, and their servant Gunga Din brought up the rear.'

In this imaginative and arresting fashion the writer of the novel *No Heaven for Gunga Din* begins his work. The plot concerns the adventures of eighty-three 'Children of Man', including a group of British and American army officers and their servant Gunga Din. Following the conclusion of the Third War, they leave Earth in the year 2084 and set out for Heaven. For more than four years they wander along the Milky Way where they encounter various fantastical beings, before meeting with Adam in the vicinity of Heaven. In order to enter Heaven they need to go to a place called the Judgment Field and obtain a 'freedom pass'. Rulings on their eligibility are


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made on the basis of their greater and lesser sins. The organisation called the Holy Agency grants them all freedom passes – all except Gunga Din. His unforgivable sin was to hope that the Harvesting-Living-War (the Third War) would start as soon as possible so that he could find a job working for the American and British forces.

Gunga Din is sent to Hell, where every night he is roasted in the fire until morning, when he comes back to life. The officers, meanwhile, report their observations on the state of the 'Hellishes' to Adam, and the father of humanity weeps aloud at the fate of his children in Hell. The inhabitants of Heaven immediately issue a resolution calling for the transfer of the Hellishes to Heaven and the abolition of Hell and the Judgment Field. The Faithful Gabriel informs Adam that the fires of Hell have been extinguished forever, but that Hell has been turned into a prison for the Hellishes, a jail just like jails on earth. The inhabitants of Heaven are not satisfied and insist that all the demands of the resolution be implemented. How the story ends is up to you…

No Heaven for Gunga Din was published in Britain in 1965 where it was well received, and translated into six other languages. It was written in English, and yet its writer, Ali Mirdrekvandi, was an Iranian labourer with little education. Ali's story, just like Gunga Din's, is a fascinating and astonishing one. He was born in 1917 or 1918 into the Drekvandi tribe in Lorestan province in western Iran. This was a courageous and long-suffering people who had over the centuries borne the brunt of attacks by nomadic Turkic and Mongol tribes, such as those led by Timur the Lame (Tamberlaine), and who still had the scars to show for it. When the Allies attacked and occupied Iran at the beginning of the 1940s, despite the latter's declaration of neutrality, the young Ali, like many other labourers, took himself to Tehran to look for work in the camp of the foreign armies.

John Hemming, editor of *No Heaven for Gunga Din*, wrote that Ali took with him letters, written in English, in which he stated that he had learnt about a thousand words in that language and was looking to learn more. It seems that the labourer from Lorestan expected nothing from his foreign employers except food, a place to sleep, and the opportunity to learn their language. Ali Mirdrekvandi had already taught himself to write in Persian, and was now obsessed with learning English. He wrote letters that Lieutenant Hemming then corrected; this officer then requested that he write a 'story' in English. The result was the writing of *Irradiant*, more than 65,000 lines long, making the work comparable in length to some of the longest novels in world literature, including Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and the Iranian Mahmoud Dowlatabadi's *Kelidar*.

Another of Mirdrekvandi's works was *The British and American Officers' Book*, which Hemming later published in Britain under the title *No Heaven for Gunga Din*. Ali worked for the foreign forces in various roles, including in the camp workshops and in the canteen. At several points, however, there were long gaps between his visits to the British lieutenant. Once he was informed that his sisters and brothers were experiencing grave difficulties: it was a time of famine in Iran because of the Allied occupation. Ali went back to his native village. When he saw the conditions his family was living in he was furious and burned his English vocabulary books. He bought food and clothing for his family with the money he had saved, and applied himself to farming. Not long after, however, he started thinking about English again, and was overcome with grief and regret.

His siblings gave him a cow to sell and buy vocabulary books with the proceeds. Subsequently, however, brigands stole his money; for a while he then worked in the village as a cowherd – but the cows ate his books.

The time came for the Allies to leave Iran. Ali maintained a relationship with Hemming for some years by correspondence. It seems that the foreign officers had promised him they would arrange for him to visit Britain and also to print his manuscripts, but over time he lost hope that these promises would ever be kept. At this point he burnt everything he had written after the departure of the British lieutenant, and set out for the town of Borujerd in Lorestan. There he became a dervish and wandered through the town crying 'O Abbas!' At night he lit a fire in the cemetery of the Imamzadeh Ja'far, where he used to study the foreign magazines that were lent to him, all the while praying for the dead on behalf of a people who never let him go hungry. **[*]**

Twenty years after the departure of the Allies from his country he breathed his last in the very same cemetery on 26 November 1964. He was living in great indigence when he died, at no more than 47 years of age. When Ali shuffled off this mortal coil, full of grief and sorrow that his eminently readable stories had not been published, little did he know that only a few months later in Britain his name would be on everyone's lips.

Ali Mirdrekvandi was no traitor to his country; rather at a time of famine and poverty imposed on his homeland he went to work for the Allies just so he could have a full stomach, and more importantly, to learn English. Even so, he accepted the nickname of 'Gunga Din' that the Americans gave him, a title that British colonialists in India gave to Indians who had betrayed their country.

In his fantastical tale *No Heaven for Gunga Din,* Mirdrekvandi made an old concern his own, namely life after death. Even as he describes a series of colourful events, he also tells us a tale of humble folk who always remain downtrodden. Sometimes we see them in the form of ordinary sailors on whom fortune has turned its back; sometimes with the name Gunga Din, a servant who even marching along the Milky Way has to serve British and American officers and polish their shoes and who is the only one to be condemned to torture in Hell. Despite all this, in *No Heaven for Gunga Din* a kind of fear and hope and faith in God is visible, one derived from Ali Mirdrekvandi's religious beliefs; as we read at the beginning of the book, 'nothing happens save the Lord wills it'. And at the end of the book, when Gunga Din and many of the Children of Man are still imprisoned in Hell, we read that, 'God loves all his creatures in one measure'.

A few months passed after the tragic death of the impoverished writer, and finally the British officer's promise was carried out. *No Heaven for Gunga Din* was published in Britain. Belatedly the doors of fame and wealth opened, for a writer who was no more. ■

Translator's note:

[*] The dervish cries 'O Abbas!' in reference to Abbas, the younger brother of the third Shi'a Imam Hoseyn, killed at the battle of Karbala in 680. He was so young at the time that afterwards he became a symbol of innocence and purity and therefore of the monstrousness of the crimes committed against his family. The Imamzadeh is a tomb of one of the descendants of the fourth Shi'a Imam.

INTERVIEWS

Shirin Neshat
Majid Majidi
Azade Shahmiri

Beyond Biopic: An interview with Shirin Neshat

By Ramin S. Khanjani

Following her successful directorial debut, Shirin Neshat's second film is a multi-layered drama about an artist's attempts to make a film of the life of Egyptian singer Oum Kulthum.

For her second film, after adapting for the screen the controversial Iranian novel *Women Without Men* in 2009, the New York-based visual artist and independent filmmaker Shirin Neshat has navigated the waters of filmic biography – looking at the life of legendary Egyptian singer Oum Kulthum. Neshat's film, however, approaches the world-famed star indirectly, by means of a framing narrative, featuring a woman director who is a shooting a biopic about Kulthum. With a fluid structure which intertwines the fictional film, life on the set and the director's dreams and visions, *Looking for Oum Kulthum* is a treatise on cinematic historiography and the doubts and fears that haunt a female artist.

UNDERLINE: Can you walk us through the genesis of this film? What made you pick this Egyptian singer as your subject?

SHIRIN NESHAT: After *Women Without Men* I developed a love affair with filmmaking and was trying to figure out what my next subject would be. Personally I felt a desire to no longer work with the subject of Iranian society, because I haven't been able to go back to Iran for so many years and I didn't want to always be working in a nostalgic way. Then I thought of Oum Kulthum as a fitting subject. She was Middle Eastern, a female musician and singer. I have tackled issues concerning women in all my films and music is a major part of my narratives, conveying the emotional aspects of each story. For me music is something that transcends national and cultural boundaries and becomes a gut reaction to socio-political subjects. Oum Kulthum's mythical status notwithstanding, I feel there is something about her which is very similar to me. Like her, I don't live a traditional life and I'm always surrounded by men. The only reason that I made this film was to see if it is possible to go under the skin of such an iconic and mythical artist, who seemed to always hide her private and personal issues and devoted herself to the public. The early script was a biopic, but I eventually decided to take on the challenge of a more experimental film, in which issues of womanhood, music and art became central.

UNDERLINE: History was front and centre in *Women Without Men*, but is not so much here. What was the reason for that?

NESHAT: In *Women Without Men* the country of Iran is almost the fifth character and we follow it through its ups and downs. In this film we used archival footage to show various historical periods and also depicted the transformation of Egyptian society through Oum Kulthum's concerns in different periods. But we also have the characters of the director and the actress, so there wasn't much room to expand very much on the historical stuff – and we didn't want to overwhelm the audience with too much information. As such, the presentation of history became very impressionistic, but I felt that it was still important to touch on it.

UNDERLINE: Why did you decide to adopt a self-reflexive structure for your film and what opportunities did this present you with?

NESHAT: I visited Jean-Claude Carrière in Paris to get his advice on the film. He read the biopic script and right off the bat he said, "Forget about a biopic. You should make it contemporary and show why she is still so incredibly relevant and why every generation knows her." Along the way I came to the conclusion that I should come back to my perspective, because Oum Kulthum is no longer an Egyptian star, but an iconic Middle Eastern star. [I thought] it should be done as an artist looking at another artist. I allowed myself to act like an artist, trying make a film

that I don't know how to make. And from then on the absolute honesty of my attempt as a non-Arab and non-Arab-speaking visual artist and filmmaker became my structure. Of course this film is an imperfect film and really shows the impossibility of making a film about Oum Kulthum.

UNDERLINE: How do you compare your own self-reflexive approach with those present in many Iranian films, such as Kiarostami's films, or a film like Bani-Etemad's *The May Lady* (1999)?

NESHAT: I think art is really a reflection of an artist's life experiences and perspectives and should be made by the transformation of a personal experience into a narrative that might go beyond the artist's own life story. If you look at my work, there's so much of me and my personal history inside those images and narratives. Kiarostami to me is more like a mystic and poet whose films are very ambiguous, yet utterly simple reflections about humankind – but they are in fact about his own way of thinking, anxieties, sense of humour and so forth. To me Bani-Etemad is like a social activist. I watched *The May Lady* long ago and now that you've brought it up I've started thinking about the connection. The subject matter is of course similar, that of a single woman constantly experiencing the conflict between her work obligations and being a mother, but in my film there are also other aspects to the narrative. We have an

Yasmin Raeis in Looking for Oum Kulthum

iconic singer who never had a child and then there's Mitra, the director, who is wondering if it is possible to be a mother and reach that level of greatness. Her questions are mainly about the challenges of being a female artist and not very sociological.

UNDERLINE: How important was it for you to choose the director's ethnicity as Iranian?

NESHAT: At some point people said, Why should she be Iranian? She could be of any nationality and still be obsessed with Oum Kulthum without knowing Arabic. But I thought that in order to really relate to the story, I had to approach it from my own experience and I simply couldn't imagine how a character of a different ethnicity might relate to the experiences of Oum Kulthum. It would have made it different and not as close to me, my heart and my experience as a Middle Eastern female artist. Some people even said, Why don't you just play the part? But that was going too far!

UNDERLINE: Mitra – the director – is presented in an ambivalent light. Her powerful ego serves as an obstacle in relating to others and yet it protects her personal vision. How did you want the spectator to feel about her?

NESHAT: There was another actress who was initially cast in this role but it didn't work out. As the new actress came in at the last minute as a replacement, we didn't have that much time together. She brought part of what she was to the character. I'm not like Mitra in the film, I'm warm and emotional, but Mitra is very controlled and distant – just like Oum Kulthum, in a way. The way we wrote the script was that when Mitra starts making the film she is feeling good and thinks that she is making a great biopic about an indestructible artist. Then slowly her personal life crumbles and she is criticised by her immediate team, her producers and others. She starts to see a contradiction between how she has thought of herself – as being very strong – and her real, weak and failing self. She wonders what her subject might have felt in a similar situation and this is like a form of revenge. She wants to say, Oum Kulthum was a human being like me, and brings her down – that gets her fired.

UNDERLINE: One thread that runs through your features is a sort of sisterhood between characters. Here the actress – Ghada – seems to be the only person who can relate to Mitra's breakdown and brings out the change in her, but following that she vanishes from the film. Can you comment on this?

NESHAT: The character of Ghada was conceived as the opposite of Mitra. She has a talent and a voice, but no ambition to become great and successful. Mitra keeps telling her that she has to believe in herself and become somebody, but Ghada is a good, human, simple woman who doesn't relate to fame and rich people. She worries about Mitra. I think the relationship between these three

women – Mitra, Ghada and Oum Kulthum, who comes to visit Mitra at the end – is very touching. When Mitra has reached the bottom it's Oum Kulthum who comes to pat her on the back and say, 'This is what it takes to be a great artist: to fail, to question yourself, to be devastated.' That's what I was hoping to build in this triangle. In *Women Without Men* we had to follow each woman from the beginning to the end, but in this film we felt that Ghada was there to support what was the essence of the character of Mitra. We even had more footage of Ghada, but we cut it, because we felt that it was just too much information.

UNDERLINE: The last scene seems to present a comparison between two artists, one who's chosen to observe the popular taste and the other who opts to remain true to her own vision. Which do you feel reflects your own approach most closely?

NESHAT: The final sequence of the film is an answer to the question that I pursued as the essence of the film. That is: don't even dare to compare yourself with someone like Oum Kulthum. And this applies to many other artists who see her as a muse. There's no evidence of failure in Oum Kulthum's career and her star only continued to rise until she died – this is not the case with me. I have never had the public image and following that she had. The choices that I have made and my life circumstances have caused me very often to bend and fall, and to be criticised. The ending of the film is an attempt to say that every artist on every scale counts and it's important to stick with your vision. Don't worry about failing and just do what you're doing. ■

Neda Rahmanian as the filmmaker Mitra in Looking for Oum Kulthum

The Tree and its Branches: A conversation with Majid Majidi

By Shahin Shajari Kohan
(Translated by Shahab Vaezzadeh)

Popular Iranian filmmaker Majid Majidi's latest feature Beyond the Clouds received its world premiere at this year's BFI London Film Festival. Set in India, the film marks Majidi's first experience of directing outside Iran. Underline recently sat down to talk with him about the production.

UNDERLINE: Your last film *Muhammad: The Messenger of God* (2015) was an ambitious, high-budget project, which exceeded all standard levels of production in Iranian cinema and received much attention upon its release in Iran. The project was intended to be a cinematic trilogy but it seems you have now returned to a style reminiscent of some of your earlier works, such as *Children of Heaven* (1997). Do you still intend to complete the *Muhammad* trilogy?

MAJID MAJIDI: It was one of my childhood dreams to make a film about the Prophet Muhammad. In fact, I considered it my religious duty to complete such an undertaking. I put everything I had into making the film and spent several years of my life organising every aspect of its production. However, I never said that I would necessarily direct every film in the trilogy. The next film may be directed by one of my colleagues and I will simply offer my ideas and assistance.

UNDERLINE: You collaborated with an international crew for your latest film, *Beyond the Clouds*. Would you say that people working outside of Iran are more skilled than their Iranian counterparts?

MAJIDI: No, I would never think such a thing. During the production of *Muhammad*, I worked with a cast and crew that comprised both domestic and international talent, and I felt just as comfortable with the Iranians as I did with my non-Iranian colleagues. Don't forget that Iranian cinema has relied on its domestic talent with great pride for many years and has established a distinguished place for itself in international cinema. The main difference is experience. Many of my Iranian colleagues do not have the experience of working on different types of projects; that is really the only difference between working with an Iranian cameraman or composer and a foreign one. Working with more experienced, international people in the industry simply reduces the number of concerns that a director may have on set, and allows everyone to do their job with more focus and efficiency.

UNDERLINE: Your native language is Persian but English is the main language spoken in your latest film. Was this ever an obstacle, in your opinion?

MAJIDI: No, the film contains very little English dialogue, most of it is actually in Hindi. That's precisely why I chose people with backgrounds in Indian cinema to bring the Indian spirit of the film to life. All of those people really helped to realise the vision that I had for the film. Meanwhile, I had already familiarised myself with Indian culture and spent some time travelling the country and observing life there. While making the film, I focused my efforts on trying to portray India as I had experienced and observed it with my own eyes.

UNDERLINE: It would seem you have a deep connection with Indian cinema.

MAJIDI: Yes, I have always respected and admired Indian cinema. Legendary figures like Satyajit Ray and Shyam Benegal have deeply influenced my perception of cinema and I admire the filmmaking techniques of directors and cinematographers such as Anil Mehta. The Indian film industry has a very professional structure and its roots can be traced back to the very core of Indian culture. In India, cinema and people are interwoven.

UNDERLINE: Interestingly, you did not use any famous stars of Indian cinema. Why did you decide not to approach more well-known actors or actresses for your film?

MAJIDI: That is simply how I work. In every film I try to find the right person to fit the look and feel of the film, and it does not matter to me whether they are an ordinary person or a trained actor. I have always insisted on finding people who authentically represent the environments that my films portray. Rather than trying to demonstrate to an

actor how a particular character should be played, I simply find that character in real life and allow him to act naturally and be himself in front of the camera. A more natural connection between the character and the scene can therefore be established, and the audience are more convinced that they are watching a real event as it unfolds.

UNDERLINE: One of the biggest talking points about the film during its production was the news that you had popular Indian film actress Deepika Padukone audition for a role. What made you decide to give her an audition?

MAJIDI: As you know, Deepika is one of the finest actresses working in India today and she is truly a master of her craft. I simply wanted her to practice a few scenes so that I could view her in the context of the film and understand how well she fit both the role and the film as a whole. By no means did I ever doubt her skill or ability as an actress; it was just important to establish how suitable she was for the film as a whole.

Majid Majidi directing Reza Naji in The Song of Sparrows (2008). Photo courtesy of Iranian Film Monthly.

UNDERLINE: Allah-Rakha Rahman, whom you've worked with on previous projects, composed the score for the film. Would you say you both had very similar points of view and ideas on this occasion?

MAJIDI: While composing the score for *Muhammad*, Rahman spent several months familiarising himself with Islamic culture in Iran and the character of the Prophet Muhammad. He even visited Iran several times. However, on this occasion such a lengthy process was not required and we've worked together enough to know how the other thinks and operates. Furthermore, the music we composed for this film was not as intricate, diverse, or even as vast as the score we produced for *Muhammad*. Overall I had a very different experience making this film and I think that Rahman also found the music to be a new experience for him.

UNDERLINE: Mehran Kashani, co-writer of *The Song of Sparrows* (2008), also co-wrote the script for this film. What made you decide not to use an Indian scriptwriter for this project?

MAJIDI: The similar vision and understanding that Mehran Kashani and I share really negated the need for another writer. Of course, we still sought the guidance and wisdom of many people during the writing process in order to produce a solid script and an accurate portrayal of India. Unfortunately, working in the Iranian film industry prevents us from collaborating with international companies and, from a legal point of view, even the simplest of collaborative works between an Iranian and foreign writer can be cumbersome. The prospect of collaborating with a writer based outside of Iran was very appealing to me, but would have required me to make special arrangements in order to facilitate such a collaboration. Most importantly, arrangements would have to be made for the writers of different nationalities and cultures to be together during the scriptwriting process.

UNDERLINE: Considering the stories and messages portrayed in your latest film, one can see how closely it is connected to some of your earlier and most popular works. Films that deal with themes of childhood, innocence, sin, and forgiveness; films with very mystical and spiritual qualities; films that have received recognition and praise at major film festivals all over the world. Would you put this latest film in the same category as *Children of Heaven* and *The Color of Paradise* (1999)?

MAJIDI: I have said this many times before and I still truly believe that filmmakers only ever make one film, and every subsequent film that they produce is simply a continuation. Just like a tree whose branches, although independent, are connected to a single body, which first sprouted from a single root. My films are very distinctive from one another and they all portray different characters, but

in terms of identity, they all flow from the same source. As a whole, my films certainly follow a discernible trend and one cannot deny that they are connected. But my filmography is large and diverse, and each film moves to a different rhythm.

UNDERLINE: Is there any particular reason why the heroes of your films are usually children or teenagers?

MAJIDI: In my opinion, childhood is the most important period in a person's life and everything that you feel and experience during this time stays with you for the rest of your life. Moreover, young characters have a purity and honesty that makes their stories much more engaging. Essentially, I am trying to discover how human thought and morality develops from the innocent spirit of a child. ■

Majidi behind the scenes of Iranian cinema's most expensive production ever, Muhammad: The Messenger of God (2015)

The Past is Not Even Past: Underline meets Azade Shahmiri

By Aras Khatami
(Translated by Shahab Vaezzadeh)

The new voice of Iranian theatre Azade Shahmiri presented her latest work Voicelessness at this year's Edinburgh International Festival. She tells Underline about how her passion for the stage developed, working outside Iran and the ideas that have shaped her recent writing.

UNDERLINE: Can you tell us about your background in theatre?

AZADE SHAHMIRI: I began my career in theatre in Iran. I studied dramatic literature and I have always done theatre work in conjunction with research and academic studies, although in recent years I have concentrated more on my research. I have not participated in many public performances in Tehran. My first play *The Blind Track of Stars* was performed at the Iran International Festival of University Theatre in 2009 and, under the creative direction of Isar Aboumahboub, was then staged at Tehran's Molavi Hall for a total of almost twenty nights in 2009. After that, all of my performances were one-off events, either a single showing or twice in one day. My last production in Tehran was a lecture-performance entitled *Damascus*, which I performed at the Mono Leev Festival in 2012 but never performed publicly.

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UNDERLINE: What have been some of your key sources of inspiration?

SHAHMIRI: While reading and analysing different works of literature as a teenager and in my early years at university, I think that three particular playwrights had a very profound effect on me: Shakespeare, Chekhov and Brecht. Jan Kott's interpretations of Greek tragedies were also very influential. Likewise, the originality of plays by Bernard-Marie Koltès and Michael Frayn was truly a revelation to me and the genius of Abbas Nalbandian is the unreachable pinnacle, in my opinion. Amongst works that I have seen in recent years, I have particularly enjoyed those of Romeo Castellucci, Brett Bailey, Rabih Mroué, and Philippe Quesne, for a variety of reasons.

Shadi Karamroudi in Voicelessness.

UNDERLINE: How do international performances compare with staging your work in Iran?

SHAHMIRI: I find it very interesting to perform for audiences who do not know Persian. Supertitles are always displayed throughout my performances so that the audience can read the dialogue in their native language and follow the story. However, when the play's spoken dialogue is not communicating any information to the audience and seems to function more as melodic, non-lexical speech, I feel that other layers of communication between the audience and the performer/play are intensified. The audience pay extra attention to every silence, movement, sound, and image; they search for meaning in every detail of the performance because speech is no longer the only language that is communicating information to them.

The most appealing thing to me is being part of a broader network and cultural circle; works of art can be used to establish connections between different cultures. These different cultures, including my own, all come together

at a specific time and place, and through art they learn more about one another. I am given a glimpse into the minds of another culture. Theatre, which itself is really a form of communication, lifts the borders between different cultures and allows them to interact.

Another benefit of performing at international festivals is being able to watch other theatre productions. That is if you are lucky enough to have any spare time, of course. I always try to watch other performances, not just to observe new and distinctive styles in the world of theatre and performing arts, but also to discover my own place amongst these productions. I find it interesting to think about the dramaturgy of festivals while watching other performances and evaluate what connections my work shares with the work of my contemporaries.

UNDERLINE: What are some of the challenges of international performances?

SHAHMIRI: Many challenges can arise for Iranian artists who are not familiar with the process of theatrical production and they encounter financial problems abroad. For a small team with a meagre budget like ourselves, we have no option but to accept the risk and uncertainty that comes with working abroad. Another challenge is the lack of effective promotion and cultural networking. Iranian artists do not have a big enough platform to be seen by international curators. The Fajr International Theatre Festival is the only event with networking opportunities yet most young artists cannot even attend it. I believe that luck has played a big part for me and other artists who have been able to perform at international events.

Aside from workshops that focus more on the practical side of theatre, I wish that more experts from the industry were invited to teach theatre practitioners everything involved in working abroad; from writing drafts and implementing them, to raising funds. Technical production direction is another issue that our theatrical society in Iran does not have a good understanding of, despite it being an essential part of any international stage production.

UNDERLINE: What was the starting point for your latest play, *Voicelessness*?

SHAHMIRI: The production of *Voicelessness* was originally proposed by the Kunstenfestivaldesarts festival in Brussels and later co-produced by the Zürcher Theater Spektakel. Without the trust and support of the Kunstenfestivaldesarts artistic director, Christophe Slagmuylder, *Voicelessness* would certainly have never been made. Christophe and I first began talking in September 2016. It was actually first suggested to me that I work on a stage production using the idea of peripheral videos seen in the installation *Not To Be*, which was staged in Mannheim, Germany in May 2016. Soheil Amirsharifi, who worked on both the text and video of *Voicelessness*, worked with me for roughly three months on the first draft, which we finished writing in December.

UNDERLINE: How do you view *Voicelessness* in the context of Iranian theatre?

SHAHMIRI: The central idea behind *Voicelessness* originated from personal issues and experiences that I have had over the years. Of course, it has been a long time since I last performed in a theatre in Tehran. My plays have been rejected twice by the Fajr International Theatre Festival in the past and for just a single performance, I was put on the waiting list of a small theatre in Tehran for two years. After two years I was then told that the theatre had a new manager who was not responsible for any commitments made in the past. After making further enquiries, I was told that there had been a mistake and my play was never on the waiting list.

There are currently very few theatres in Tehran that appreciate the importance of concepts such as theatre groups, scriptwriting, and actor/director training. *Voicelessness* therefore has very little in common with conventional Iranian theatre; in particular, the tendency of theatres in Iran to give roles to famous stars in order to attract a larger audience and fill performance halls.

UNDERLINE: The meaning of time appears to be an important aspect of *Voicelessness*. How did you decide to organise the material to effectively address the past and the present?

SHAHMIRI: *Voicelessness* is told through three different time periods: the past, present and future. The story takes place fifty years in the future, the year 2070 , and this time period functions as the narrative's present. The audience follows the story as it unfolds in this future time period, where a young woman is looking into her mother's past. The young woman traces her mother's past back to a time before she had even been born; when her mother was approximately the same age. The woman actually has no memories from the past that she is uncovering and, to some extent, she seems to be fabricating the memories herself. She selects things from the past in order to construct her own narrative; something that all of us do in our everyday lives, whether we are aware of it or not. You might call this ability to choose which moments to remember and which to discard a form of willpower.

Our hopes and desires affect how we remember the past; it's as if we only remember what we want to remember. For me, the past is always a part of the present in the sense that the past is always being constructed in the present. The story of our lives is always being reconstructed based on our selective memories and interpretations of the past. Perhaps Faulkner's famous line, 'The past is never dead. It's not even past,' expresses more aptly what I am trying to say. The message behind that statement is that complete truth is fundamentally unobtainable. Our pasts are therefore directly connected to the quality of our present circumstances. The truth is that we choose what to accept as reality, what to change in our recollections of the past, and what to forget.

UNDERLINE: What were your intentions in using video as you have in *Voicelessness*?

SHAHMIRI: The videos were the work of Soheil Amirsharifi. The film production process for us was no different than making a few short films. Soheil committed just as much time and energy to the production of the films for *Voicelessness* as he does for his own short films. The films correspond perfectly to the play's script and do not contain any decorative or stylistic visual components. In fact, it is these films that convey the play's central ideas and meaning.

The play's main, linear narrative follows the story of the young woman as she converses with the memory of her mother. We also have a nonlinear period of time that progresses in parallel, which gives us a scattered look at the mother's life through videos that she had recorded with her own camera. It was not our intention to create a story with an oddly-sequenced timeline that the audience would have to piece together. Soheil and I were always aware that our story would not be simple. The play involves a relatively large number of characters and details that must be introduced to the audience in order to progress the story. Therefore it was best to keep the narrative structure as simple as possible. In fact, we do not use any elaborate plot devices or twists.

The videos have two different functions: the first is to scrutinise the concept of documentation and question how video footage, which can be so easily manipulated, is used to reconstruct the events of our lives and to prove the truth. The second function of the videos is to construct a nonlinear narrative. With the help of these videos we return to the past and progress through time.

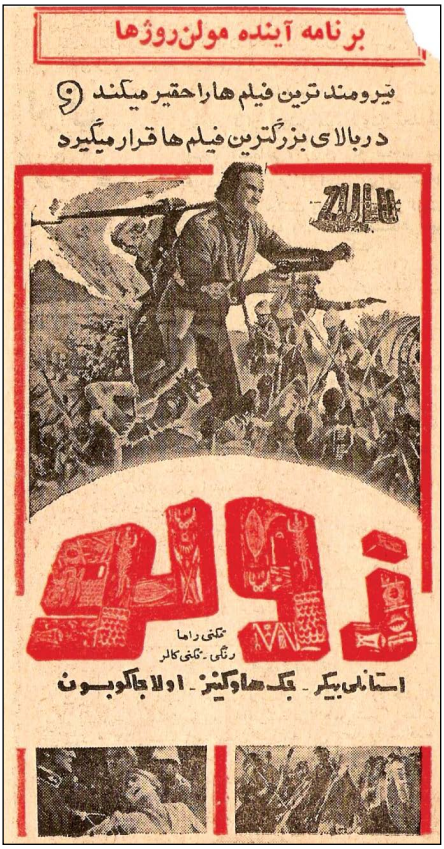
UNDERLINE: How have you found the experience of staging your work at the Edinburgh International Festival?

SHAHMIRI: *Voicelessness* had already been performed in Brussels and Zurich but for me, the performance in Edinburgh was different because of the passion and energy that surrounded the city. It was very exciting and refreshing for me to see an entire city captivated by one festival. That energy was also transferred to us. Moreover, the festival's technical support team were very professional and helpful to us. In my opinion, the combination of all these factors allowed us to give one of our greatest ever performances in Edinburgh. The festival had a very intimate atmosphere, which allowed us to talk to the audience, many of whom were theatre professionals themselves, after our performances.

I always worry about how my work will be received and perhaps in Edinburgh, where most of the audience were professional artists, my worries were increased twofold. However, the feedback that I received was beyond my wildest expectations. Audience members were remarkably engaged; they all had their own creative interpretations of the script and the performance, to which many had drawn parallels to their own personal issues and unanswerable questions. ■

Gallery:

British films of the 1960s on Iranian screens



An example of the inflated language used to advertise films: "Puts the strongest films to shame and stands above the biggest motion pictures produced." An ad from 30 June, 1966, for Zulu (1964).

The Cliff Richard vehicle Wonderful Life (1964) shown on 30 January, 1965, as the special Eid-e Fetr (end of Ramadan) screening.

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