

Scarlet Stone

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Photo by Jim Carmody

As the performance stage was still tugging at my thoughts, and as the sound of music and verses continued to turn in my ear, I exited the theater with the force of the crowd. His daughter (Bibi Kasrai), held her own daughter's hand, and with a sense of disorientation not unlike my own, kindly answered people's questions about *Scarlet Stone*. I came up to her... I held her and held her father's memory in great esteem. In those close moments... there in that assembly of shared feeling and tears, we were unaware of our surroundings, but forced to part ways in the push of the crowd.

The Persian Art Society staged the performance of *Scarlet Stone* on Sunday, December 10 in the UCLA's Freud Theatre. Shahrokh Yadegari composed the music and directed *Scarlet Stone*, a work of Siavash Kasrai. *Scarlet Stone* was Kasrai's last poem - a poet of such enduring poems as *Arash*, *The Archer (Arash Kamangir)*. The distinctive performance of *Scarlet Stone* was a combination of music, dance (not in the usual sense), image and word, which has launched a new chapter in the world of Iranian performances outside of Iran in terms of a new form of expression: it has drawn the imagination of the Iranian audience in the sense that literature (poetry and its meaning) in this production maintained a central role and was a principle element. Of course, without such skilled performances by the actors, and the theatrical music, it wouldn't have been so impressive and many would remain forever unaware of it. The fact that most Iranians learn their own literature through visual and oral art makes this type of performance doubly important.

Homa Sarshar raised the curtain and opened the show with her cerebral and beautiful text. With utmost gravity and level, firm voice, she spoke of the importance of Ferdowsi's work as the origin and then Siavash Kasrai's consideration in the creation of

a work borrowed from the epic verse of *Rostam and Sohrab* (the tragic masterpiece of the “Sage of Tus”, Ferdowsi) with a modern perspective and return to the present day. She gave the audience guidance and background to the piece. In that opening, Sarshar emphasized that all Iranians are affected by a common pain. An injury that isn't from ignorance but one from which even the knowledgeable among us are not safe. A pain that comes from intolerance and blindness. A pain that despite all of our tales of purity, all the magnificent poems, and all the indirect advice, still finds root in our land and prevails over our reason and intellect. Sarshar returned to this inarguable regret over this ancient pain and with the hope that this type of art and performance will make some of us aware of it. Thus, she turned the stage over to the performers.

Shahrokh Moshkin Ghalam in the role of Sohrab was also the show's choreographer and costume designer, and Afshin Mofid, son of Bijan Mofid, was charged with the role of Rostam. Afshin Mofid had been active in dance and theater since childhood, but with the death of his father (20 years ago), he picked up another line of work, and as the years passed, eventually said goodbye to the stage. He returned to the stage with the offer to play Rostam. And he has proven how with great determination and uninterrupted effort he could prepare for this role. Mofid's virtuosity made for several memorable and striking scenes.

Gordafarid (the narrator of the story) has gained renown as Iran's first female traditional story-teller (*Naghal*), but in *Scarlet Stone*, she wasn't in this role. I believe this was intentional and that they wanted to distance her work from tradition and align it more with the present. She read the poems beautifully at different moments, and, in contrast to the spectator's expectations (eager to hear her exhilarating traditional oratory), brought the story from that arena to a different stage.

Ida Saki and Miriam Peretz were two female actors in this performance. Saki played the role of the Shahnameh's Gordafarid and Peretz appeared as Tahmineh. Saki is very young. Before this, I had watched her with wonder on a televised international dance competition, but *Scarlet Stone* was this young woman's first appearance on a theater stage and among the greats of the profession, no less. Ida's work is breathtaking. She has such control of her muscles that she can execute any movement at any degree of speed. For me, Ida brought to mind the ancient Greek athletes whose supple figures' abilities reach the pinnacle of grace. Those scenes featuring her and Shahrokh in battle and then in intimacy were particularly lovely. Miriam Peretz is an esteemed dancer. In the opening scene she shown brightly, and along with Afshin Mofid in the role of Rostam, created a most beautiful romance. This was perhaps the first time that we have encountered a lovemaking scene in Iranian theater that, while it had its eroticism, also observed our culture's sense of modesty.

It seems that in each role he plays, Shahrokh Moshkin Ghalam devotes and brings to stage all of his being and art. We have seen repeatedly what an artist he is. Whether in the role of Manijeh or whether as Sohrab, or when in one of his past performances he spun around the stage with a rope around his neck - this spectator was choking - and when he was playing the buffoon in “Zohreh and Manouchehr” - the audience couldn't stop laughing. With an unwavering voice and wondrous skill, he recited this story's poems and, with movements that meaningfully corresponded, he created the subject's tragic mood. From any angle, in all manner and under any condition, Moshkin Ghalam is an actor equipped with a diverse set of artistic tools, including dance.

A few years back I saw a work by Shahrokh Yadegari based on the poems of Forough Farokhzad. It was then that I became aware of this artist's existence, and I admired his distinctive approach. In this performance, I must say that the musical instruments

and the rhythm of the songs and melodies were fitting and not imposed on the performance or poem. He aligned them with the scenes and mood of the performance, presenting a beautiful composition. From ancient music, original Iranian music to new music. Yadegari spent two years to carefully selecting the music and the poems from the Shahnameh and *Scarlet Stone*. Responsibility for the staging of the work, including the direction of the show, was all his. One must applaud Mr. Yadegari's attention to detail, for during the performance the poems' English translation was projected at the front of the stage for those audience members not familiar with the Persian language! Yadegari adeptly read poems in the voice of Rostam, though his presence on stage was hidden.

Parvin Javadi, under the auspices of the Persian Art Society, was the producer of this fine performance. She not only worked on the management of this production, but also read several of Tahmineh's short verses, for which I praise her very much. Her reading for this performance was nourishing. Not only was the soul of the poem made clear but her's was also a smooth and steady voice.

On the story and poems:

Siavash Kasrai turns to the story of Rostam and Sohrab, and consequently lands on a different set of difficulties facing today's Iran. He wrote this work in the last years of his short life, with a regret-laden perspective on the Shahnameh's legends, weaving a much different story. In Kasrai's epic *Scarlet Stone* the same armband appears as it did in the Shahnameh - symbol of the preciousness of the predecessor, kinship, attachment - that today's young Iranians hide beneath their shirtsleeves, as they believe the new world does not give credence to the ancient symbols. And without support or cover for any background or symbol, with an arrogance belief on abilities of the young goes to war against the enemies of the ancestral homeland, unaware that the enemy is none other than the father! And the father battles his son without recognizing him, without any understanding of his fervor or rage or his hopes and dreams.

In this sorrowful battle place, where new ideals combat distant beliefs, the father overcomes his son with deceit based on beliefs that, layer upon layer across the ages, overtake the father's sense and instruct his trickery in this battle, making him a slave of conquest at any price... Tahmineh's role in *Scarlet Stone* is the very role of the Iranian mother who values her son as "war treasure," for protecting her beloved – the traditions and values of the homeland – but for the reason of being a "woman", sees the preservation of those values in the protection of the peace between past and future:

*I thought in raising a son
skilled and handsome
that Tahamtan's heated temper
would become serene*

*That the sitting of this son with that father
in our homeland
would burn the root of enmity's fruit
and shelter this realm
within the wings of love*

Unfortunatley, it's not possible to fit the entire poem onto these pages but I must emphasize that Kasrai, with the sorrow that is poets' forte, transmits the hurt of his country's youth through the voice of Sohrab:

*Father and son face to face and estrangement
Strange with one hundred clues of visage and stature*

*I didn't recognize you
You didn't recognize me
Who is this concealing eye-closing sorcerer?
Wherefore this blindness?*

And again from the mouth of Sohrab:

*I came
to set justice and brotherhood
on the throne
and in the spirit of service
search for my father.*

*Let liberty be
our wholesome custom.
Let us open wide the doors of treasures and wealth,
let no one sleep hungry in our lands.*

*I said that my war
is the end of wars.*

*From here on, all the world is love and brotherhood,
and the stems of roses the emblem
on the quivers and shields of heroes.*

Yes, it was also Kasrai's hope to see stems of roses in the barrels of guns of his country's combative men and this hope one day came to be... and alas...