

The first production of *Scarlet Stone*, the modern epic of Rostam and Sohrab on stage at the University of California San Diego

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Photo by Jim Carmody

Last Saturday night, for the first time, a new production from Ferdowsi's epic of Rostam and Sohrab was staged at the University of California San Diego's Mandel Weiss Forum theatre, which included poems from *Scarlet Stone*, the last epic work of the late modern poet Siavash Kasrai, and a mix of music, dance, theater, narration and special effects. The event was put on through the effort of an Iranian arts society, a cultural organization and Southern California nonprofit that aims to preserve and propagate the music and art of Iran and through the mobilizing efforts of Shahrokh Yadegari, composer, professor of music and theater at the University of California at San Diego and Parvin Javadi, producer, arts consultant, and producer of a weekly traditional Iranian music program for a Los Angeles radio station.

Scarlet Stone is the result of months of hard work and collaboration between the outstanding Iranian composer Shahrokh Yadegari and Shahrokh Moshkin

Ghavam, dancer, actor, member of Comédie-Française and choreographer, as well as the participation of selected Iranian and non-Iranian artists and others involved.

Among the rare artistic ensemble, in addition to Moshkin Ghavam (who plays the role of Sohrab with the utmost beauty in this performance), we see Afshin Mofid, son of Bijan Mofid and former star of the New York City Ballet in the role of Rostam. Fatemeh Habibzad who is the first female Iranian “Naghal” (a traditional Iranian story teller) and who is known by her stage name “Gordafarid” plays the role of The Sage of Tuus - the poet, Ferdowsi. Also appearing on stage, the young dancer Ida Saki, a fresh and talented Iranian in the role of Gordafarid, and Mariam Peretz, of the international dance troupe Silk Road, in the role of Tahmineh.

In the work’s musical plan, Yadegari was joined by Azam Ala (vocalist), Kourosh Moradi on daf and tanbour, Keyavash Nourai on violin, Khosrow Soltani (sorna) and Mohammad Zadeh on percussion instruments and tonbak. Ian Wallace (set and projection design), Omar Ramos and Kristin Hayes (lighting design) had a noticeable hand in the show’s technical design. The performance opened by a reading of an introduction by Homa Sarshar (writer, journalist, radio producer and resident of Los Angeles) entitled, “Championship and Heroism, Wisdom and Sentiment” that gives form to Kasrai’s *Scarlet Stone* - a poem that the poet has dedicated to his partner in exile, “to my wife Mehri with whose life, inspiration, openness, I endured exile and distance from loved ones.”

Also present, the poet’s daughter Bibi Kasrai and one of the supporters who helped bring the project to fruition: “*Scarlet Stone* was my father’s last epic poem, composed in the bitter migration that all of us Iranians have had to tolerate and because of being far from his homeland. Like his epic *Arash, The Archer* it spread by word of mouth and received the renown that is worthy of it. I say word of mouth because *Arash, The Archer*, in those times was not published in the form and extent that it deserved, but it spread by word of mouth into the universe of epic hopes of the Iranian people. Therefore, if I say *Scarlet Stone* went unrecognized, I wouldn’t be speaking incorrectly.” Bibi Kasrai continues: “*Scarlet Stone* was composed in the years of my father’s exile from the country he loved. But this same distance, in isolation and exile, gave him the opportunity to look inward again and to weigh his ideas against his hopes and reality and to speak with the new generation. *Arash* was a tale of a legendary champion who placed his life on the arrow to save of Iran’s territorial integrity. But *Scarlet Stone* is a life that is so devoted to wisdom that it hands itself to the sword of the father for the awakening of the next generation. In which it says:

***Let not the lovers take the wrong path,
But advance on the road of knowing
With this scarlet torch.***

During the time my father composed *Scarlet Stone*, the generation that is seeing it on stage today may not have yet been in the cradle. But he was certain *Scarlet Stone* would be the epic for Iran's young and future generation, as *Arash, The Archer* was the epic for the generation of Iranians who view *Scarlet Stone* today with the baggage of events and experience. My father was a poet with great hopes for the future generation. This is his identity card without date, birth or death."

On the staged production of *Scarlet Stone*

The work that Shahrokh Yadegari as a composer, director, and sound designer, and Shahrokh Moshkin Ghalam as a choreographer have created, is a rare event. It is a new, multidimensional and unparalleled experience of artistic collaboration in live music, dance and movement.

Kasrai's *Scarlet Stone*, a modern copy of a Parsi legend, is a reflection of the daring struggles of Iran's people, especially of youth and women in the quest for freedom and democracy. Production work on *Scarlet Stone* began in 2009 at the time of Iran's people's movement tagged "The Green Movement," and it was supported by grants from such organizations as Creative Capitol's MAPFund, the "University of California Institute of Research in the Arts".

Shahrokh Yadegari says of the work: "The essential and important point that exists in this poem of Kasrai's is its depiction of the value of wisdom and its superiority over "passion." This work draws our attention to the need Iranians have to accept the responsibilities for the role they've played in shaping that culture over the last fifty years. In this way, Kasrai, with a critical but hopeful look, gives us power and hope."

Yadegari believes that "for many years, the only option for a socio-political movement was either a leaning to the right or left: "Kasrai who was himself of the leftist tradition and a victim of illusions that the leftist movements in Iran constructed for their supporters, writes *Scarlet Stone* as a strongly optimistic epic with honor and pride to confront and counter the difficulties and problems of today's Iran. We sense that the recent people's movements in Iran, as witnessed by the fact that all classes are crying out with one voice their desires to bring about change and obtain freedom, is the best proof of the message that Siavash Kasrai has hidden in *Scarlet Stone*. Our production of Kasrai's work is presented with the use of modern elements in hand with deep devotion to Iran's historic artistic traditions and values. Use of modern technology, sound and video also help to stage this verse and arrangement in the best way possible."

The production opens with music by Shahrokh Yadegari and the rousing sound of an unrecognizable and perhaps never heard ancient instrument, and drawn out by the paced silences and the song's rhythm along with the percussive instruments that join the present to distant times and long past history. Slowly the movement of light and lines from Ferdowsi's epic appear before the audience on a stage veiled with curtains from the folds of beckons the light and shadows to itself. The narrator (Fateme Habibzad, "Gordafarid") comes center stage colored by lights of green, red, violet and blue. With the opening lines of the narrator, comes Rostam on "Turani" soil on the road to Samangan, in search of his horse Rakhsh, bringing these lines from Kasrai to the viewers' minds:



***Tahmineh
Facing the mirror
drunk with love, murmuring
hair unloosed in the breeze awaiting Rostam***

***Hail, Tahamtan arrives
my distant beloved
his steps nearing the threshold
Where is Rostam and whither our city, Samangan?
Whose might is this
that draws him to the night chamber?
---the last zebra hunt and losing Rakhsh
each an excuse in time's container,
revealing an apt chance for my longing.***

***Guide of the Cosmos,
in such a night as this, satisfy my desire***

Tahmineh and Tahamtan's love are imagined and recreated with intricate choreography by Shahrokh Moshkin Ghalam (Tahmineh, danced by Miriam Peretz longs for a son from this hero, Tahamtan/Rostam, danced by Afshin Mofid). Tahmineh's Salome-like dance is performed with such sincerity and courage in exposing her love for Rostam that its expression is unequalled, even in our times.

Tahmineh is a woman who is initiator in lovemaking, and with each piece of clothing that she tears away, offers a provocative opening to the private Iranian hero, far from home. Their push and pull and coming together leads to a dance that in the end plants the seed of humanity. The seed, a “unique child of an age” .. and so it goes that the *Scarlet Stone* is passed from one to the other, and Sohrab is born like the birth of man. Sohrab, like his father, learns to bat (or play polo) at three years old, and at five - archery and by ten years old no one can rival him. Through the choreography of Moshkin Ghalam, the audience sees Sohrab on horseback, on the hunt, incomparable, but ever with searching eyes in hopes of his father. When Sohrab eventually learns that Rostam-e Dastan is his father, he rebelliously decides to go to Iran, to overthrow Kaykovous and put Rostam in his stead, and to place himself on throne of Turan, replacing Afrasiab. “As long as he is father and I am son, no one else in the world shall wear the crown.” The rebellion of the inexperienced and pure “young hero” Sohrab is the sound of his objection that summons the father, wanting to know where he’s from, such an alluring power pulling him toward an unknown and perhaps sealed fate.

*I told you, didn't I?
That
Afrasiab must never sense
the scent of your joy
But you, proud in your "good thoughts"*

But you, in haste to see Tahamtan

*shut wisdom's eyes.
The enemy reached out
his hand
in expedience,
but you, unknowing,
were mistakenly sitting with those hypocrites*

In the hand-to-hand combat of Sohrab and Gordafarid, Iran’s intrepid woman warrior (danced by Ida Saki), Sohrab’s sorrow and anger at this unfulfilled love, warmongering, deceitfulness of those around him in hiding the truth so that the father, not recognizing his son in Sohrab and “Tahamtan’s face-off ...

The war of the body against its own, the melding of electronic music with traditional instruments, the synchronized movements of Moshkin Ghalam and Mofid (as Sohrab and Rostam) and especially the movements reminiscent of ancient athletics that ... fit into this collection with unparalleled elegance... Shahrokh Yadegari’s music that is the string upon which the brilliant gems that are the dancers and narrators beautifully hang, the revealing of the Scarlet Stone, all of these wondrous and amazing moments are created in this multimedia production of the *Scarlet Stone*.

With the death of Sohrab and arriving at the the climax of the tragedy, the journey of Scarlet Stone passes the sorrowful times of Ferdowsi and begins the modern epics of the Siavash Kasrai. Here time is no longer an element. Dance, music, story-telling of the epics, lighting, the play of video, and the actors and dancers, all become one with the world of the play, and the moment of present, and the time of the story become one.

Tahmineh thinks:

O creator

You granted the greatest and took away the greatest

What is justice and the unjust?

What is it?

It is which?

And Rostam:

How blind, Rostam. May his name be forgotten

The peace yet offered --

he goes to war...

When your hand draws the dagger of deceit

be warned it will reach you in retribution

And Sohrab:

Mother,

Every love that you harbor me,

grant him

without censure

for he is the loneliest being in the world.

And Sohrab to Gordafarid:

If we didn't drink from love,

we witnessed it as a fistful of roses

floating along the current

Though, the path through the Valley of Darkness

is in my sight

I am dying in love

Now go and may your body and soul be pure and joyous

May you forever

remember me with love.