

FEATHERS OF FIRE: A Feast for the Senses



SEA MONSTER AND ZAUL

To a packed audience in the Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium of the Metropolitan Museum of Art/NY on May 15, Hamid Rahmanian and a host of puppeteers, dancers (“shadowcasters”) and technical experts brought a key story of the tenth century classic, the *Shahnameh* (*The Epic of the Persian Kings*), to life.¹ This was one of several introductions around the country of this feast for the senses.²

Feathers of Fire was conceived, designed and directed by 2014 Guggenheim fellow Hamid Rahmanian who opened the performance with a short introduction in front of the screen.³ Wisely, he brought a shadow puppet with him to show the audience, many of whom were probably unfamiliar with that ancient art form. In an odd mirroring of art and reality, a baby crying in the audience was suddenly eclipsed by the sound of a baby in the story—the birth of Zaul, the albino son of Saum and Dastaneh. Abandoned by his father because of his strange appearance, Zaul was rescued and raised by the great mythical bird, the Simorgh. When Zaul was sent back to live as a young human, Simorgh gave him three magical golden feathers to burn in case he ever needed her.

The *Shahnameh* was written by the great poet Ferdowsi of Tus (b. 940 C.E.) in what is now the eastern part of Iran. In the shadow play, the story is narrated in English by Rustam, son of Zaul and Rudابه (the protagonists of *Feathers of Fire*). In the scenario, Rahmanian decided to focus on the section of the *Shahnameh* about the star-crossed lovers Zaul and Rudابه. Rustam only makes an actual appearance near the end of the performance.

Behind a cinema-sized (15’ x 30’) screen, the puppeteers and eight shadowcasters kept the story moving forward, employing two high-end projectors donated by Canon USA for this purpose. The story is projected through 160 shadow puppets and over 100 digitally animated backgrounds (orchestrated by Mohammad Talani).

Feathers of Fire plays with shadows in a multitude of ways—from changing the image size, to interacting with a host of special effects, to an evocative final moment when the puppeteers and actors walk in random directions behind the screen, awakening us to the bodies of the performers. In the next moment, when the performers emerge in front of the screen, we become even more aware of the illusion-makers. The sparkling colors of the puppets (handcrafted from a special kind of cardboard and colored celluloid by Neda Kazemifar and Spica Wobbe), and the surreal shapes of the masks continued to enchant the audience even when in full view.

While the puppets and masks were indeed effective, the real splendor of *Feathers of Fire* lies in the vast collection of backdrops and digital projections that provided a sense of depth, movement and detail. As soon as I saw the cityscapes, domes and minarets, the work of Lotte Reiniger came to mind. Her *Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926) was the first full-length animated feature film (predating *Snow White*) composed entirely of expertly cut silhouettes. So I was not surprised to learn that Rahmanian was inspired by Reiniger’s work. From cities to gardens (where flowers changed colors as lovers passed) to astrological discs whirling in the sky, waves crashing, horses galloping and fireworks exploding, each visual moment was more splendid than the last.

The performance picked up in smoothness as the seventy minutes progressed. Particularly effective was the performance of the Simorgh (performance and voice by Rose Nisker) whose bearing conveyed a nobility difficult to portray with shadows. Her costume combines a feminine grace with a sense of other-worldliness.⁴

Among the comic moments was the speech of an Italian merchant-emissary (reminiscent of the one in ShadowLight’s *In Xanadu*), the giggling of Rudابه’s maidservants and an almost southern Iranian music style dance during a wedding celebration. Rahmanian worked with Larry Reed, founder and director of ShadowLight Productions,⁵ as well as Banu productions. *Feathers of Fire* was two years in production and three months in rehearsal with the present cast.

An original score was composed by Loga Ramin Torkian and Azam Ali, using a mix of Middle Eastern and western orchestral instruments.⁶ The 62 minutes of music, and over 1,000 pre-recorded sounds, helped to set the tone and also provide clues about distance and proximity of the characters and settings.

Fictionville Studio’s Melissa Hibbard was the head of production, with Ahmad Kiarostami (son of filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami) as co-producer. Major funding for the Met production came from the Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute and the Mossavar-Rahmani Fund for Iranian Art. The San Francisco performance at Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture, Cowell Theater on January 16-19 (2016) received funds from the Jim Henson Foundation, among others. The entire project is sponsored by Canon USA, with major funding by a host of foundations with connections to Iranian culture.

Rahmanian expresses the hope that *Feathers of Fire* will offer a view of the Middle East that allows the audience to see a rich history extending beyond recent wars and acts of extremism. He sees himself as a “cultural activist,” using an art form (the shadow play) that has ties to Iran, Egypt and Turkey, as well as to nations in Southeast Asia and China.

Certainly this tale—with aspects reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Rapunzel*, the *Firebird*, and the *Jungle Book*—has universal appeal for audiences of all ages.

For more photos, links to fabulous books on the production and *The Shahnameh* and more, go to www.unima-usa.com.

—review by Linda C. Ehrlich,
Associate Professor at CASE Western Reserve University

Endnotes

1 The *Shahnameh* covers the reign of 50 monarchs (including three queens) and continues on to the life of Alexander the Great. It was often recited by itinerant story tellers (*naqqals*). It is the longest poem written by a single poet and is responsible for the preservation of the Persian language from Arabic. For more information about the *naqqals*, see Kumiko Yamamoto, *The Oral Background of Person Epics* (Leiden, 2003).

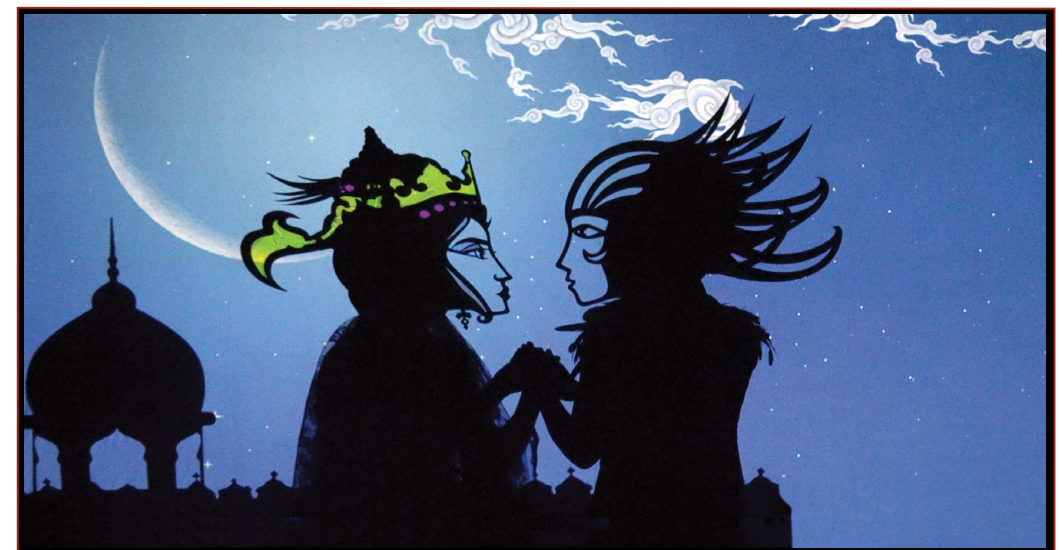
2 The world premiere was held at Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) on Feb. 5-8 (2016). The cast includes: Aureen Almario, Ya Wen Chien, Caryl Kientz, Rose Nisker, Fred C. Riley III, Lorna Velasco, and Dina Zarif. For more information please visit: www.kingorama.com and the *Shahnameh: The Epic of the Persian Kings* Facebook page about upcoming performances.

3 Rahmanian is also a documentary and feature film director whose work has premiered in a host of film festivals and television channels nationally and internationally.

4 In Sufi mysticism, Simorgh is considered a metaphor for the Divine. She has also been compared to the Western phoenix.

5 ShadowLight Productions has been located in San Francisco since 1972. Reed, trained as a *dalang* (“shadow master”) in the Balinese *wayang kulit* tradition, combines multimedia and live actors in ShadowLight’s many striking productions.

6 Loga Ramin Torkian and Azam Ali were nominated for a Canadian JUNO Award for their album *Lamentation of Swans*. Loga Ramin Torkian co-founded the World Music groups Niyaz and Axiom of Choice.



ZAUL AND RUDABEH

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