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On a Chicago stage, hundreds of puppets will retell an ancient Iranian story

Intricate figures leap, dance and do battle in ‘Song of the North,’ one of the shows featured in the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, kicking off Jan. 18.

By Stefano Esposito Jan 17, 2024, 3:32pm EST



Hamid Rahmanian, creator, director and designer of “Song of the North,” a show that combines shadow puppetry and projected animation, holds a fan of puppets that will be used in the show at the Studebaker Theater in the Loop.

Hamid Rahmanian is waging a war — one he started about 16 years ago.

His army: hundreds of shadow puppets, many brandishing shadow spears, bows and arrows, swords.

His battle strategy is plucked from the pages of “Shahnameh,” a 1,000-year-old, 55,000-verse epic poem that has, he says, “engulfed” his life. For

Rahmanian, the ancient text, written in Persian, has become a way to fight the stark stereotypes of Iran so often seen in the West.

“Iran is like a symphony — a grand, opulent symphony,” explained Rahmanian, a 55-year-old Iranian based in Brooklyn, New York. “But you only hear a few notes from that symphony in the West.”

He’s in Chicago this week, setting up his “Song of the North” show, a love story taken from “Shahnameh” — which is part myth, part history — that audiences can see as part of the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, running from Jan. 18-28 at 26 venues across the city.

“If someone has not stepped into a performance of contemporary puppetry in the past 10 or 20 years, they would be shocked and astounded at what they see at any of these shows at our festival,” says Blair Thomas, the festival’s founder and artistic director.

Life-size wolves constructed from scraps of wood, leather, bits of old carpet — even the bellows from an accordion — lope across the stage in La Liga Teatro Elástico’s “The Beast Dance.”

Puppet and puppeteer cross over into each other’s worlds in the beautiful and haunting “Chayka,” a dream-like work from the Belgo-Chilean company Belova-Iacobelli.

On the stage of the Fine Arts Building’s Studebaker Theater this week, Rahmanian flits puppet-like from one enormous cardboard box to another, eager to show off some of the hundreds of shadow puppets and masks to be used in his show.

“Oh yes, this mask is good — you’ll love it!” gushes Rahmanian, who moved to America about 30 years ago.

His are delicate, intricate designs — almost like black lace, but colored too to give the work a glittering, mosaic feel.

The vast sweep of Iranian history provides the inspiration for the work. If you’ve seen the the colossal human-headed winged bull in the University of Chicago’s Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, the puppet designs will likely look familiar.

Puppets leap, dance and do battle — some 483 in all — projected onto a 35-by-15-foot screen that spans most of the Studebaker stage.

Actors wearing puppet masks add to the delicate physicality of the show, scheduled for performances at 7:30 p.m. Jan. 19 and 1 and 5:30 p.m. Jan. 20 at the Studebaker, 410 S. Michigan.

It's the story of Manijeh, a young Turanian princess who falls in love with Bijan, an Iranian knight. It's a forbidden love because the lovers come from warring kingdoms. Naively, Manijeh believes the union could bring peace, Rahmanian says. So she kidnaps Bijan, bringing him to her palace.

“If you look at the Iranian woman in history, especially in the ‘Shahnameh,’ they are the ones who are taking charge, ... These are very strong and bad-ass ladies,” he says.

In his never-ending quest to shine light on “Shahnameh,” a work that took the Persian poet Ferdowsi 30 years to write, Rahmanian has reproduced its stories in illustrated, audio book and concert forms — even pop-up books.

There is something special about the story told with shadow puppetry, he said. “When you work with shadow — part of it is the imagination of the audience that actually fills in the gaps,” Rahmanian said.

Rahmanian's Chicago show almost didn't happen. Last October, after he'd finished a run of shows in San Francisco — and just as he was getting set to drive north to Seattle — thieves stole his truck, one filled with all of the masks, props and other equipment for the show. The truck was retrieved a few days later, but many of the puppets and masks were damaged or destroyed, and all the projectors and costumes stolen.

The Seattle show was cancelled. A GoFundMe campaign was started to rebuild the show. “I didn't have much hope. You have to imagine, it's the middle of the war in Gaza and I thought, these people are losing their lives and livelihood. ... No one is going to come to help me make my puppet show,” he said.

Rahmanian was was wrong. Supporters from across the globe raised about \$100,000 in less than one month, he said.

“I was stunned at the way people responded. I'm very grateful for that. It makes me steadfast to what I'm doing,” he said.

