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Hundreds of Shadow Puppets Were Stolen. A Bystander Helped Crack the Case.

Many of the puppets were still missing, however, after the theft of a U-haul truck in San Francisco holding props for the critically acclaimed Persian epic “Song of the North.” It was unclear if the show would go on.



Shadow puppets from “Song of the North” that were stolen on Sunday. They took years to make. Credit...Richard Termine

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Inside the U-Haul were nearly 500 handmade shadow puppets and dozens of masks, costumes, and backdrops — the culmination of three years of painstaking labor, which, on Sunday evening, came to life in a balletic performance before a crowd of hundreds at a theater in San Francisco.

On Monday morning, the puppeteers awoke to find the truck gone.

At first, they hoped the truck, parked at a Comfort Inn in the city's northeast, had been mistakenly towed, said Hamid Rahmanian, 55, an Iranian American artist and the creator of the show "[Song of the North](#)," an adaptation of the Persian poet Ferdowsi's 10th-century epic "[Shahnameh](#)" that combines shadow puppetry, animation, and music.

But when hotel employees reviewed the security camera footage, it quickly became clear that the truck had been stolen. "My face dropped — my hands became cold," Rahmanian said. Then, more than 48 hours later, on Wednesday morning, he received a call: A resident had spotted the truck in the city's west and notified the police. Rahmanian rushed to the scene to find years of careful work strewn about the truck in a "shamble."

The thieves appeared to have rifled through the boxes inside the truck, throwing some things away, and destroying others, he said, noting that while the full scale of the damage was unclear, at least 200 puppets were missing, and all of the costumes were gone.

The next stop on the show's global tour was Seattle, where a performance was scheduled for Friday. It was unclear whether the show would go on.

The San Francisco Police Department said that it had received a call Wednesday morning from a resident in Richmond, northeast of San Francisco, about a "possible recovered stolen vehicle."

The police confirmed it was the same U-Haul and were investigating. No arrests had been made. The department did not offer more information about the contents of the security camera footage.

Rahmanian, who moved from Iran to New York three decades ago to pursue a career in graphic design, said he had created "Song of the North" over several years in an endeavor to [adapt the "Shahnameh,"](#) or "Book of Kings," for a Western audience. "There is a misrepresentation of Iranian culture, and everything is very much politicized," he said. "Iran is like a symphony. But we only hear one note."

His work has garnered [glowing reviews](#) and audiences in places including China, Poland, France and Iowa. The puppet performances can take years to design and choreograph, Rahmanian said, noting that "Song of the North" involved creating a storyboard of 352 frames, more than 200 backdrops and an [ensemble of nine people](#) whose actions must be precise to the inch. For the 83-minute duration of the show, he added, "they work like a Swiss watch."

The laborious, costly work has not been very lucrative, he said, noting that he preferred to keep ticket prices affordable so that families could attend the shows. "There is no sane person" who would do this kind of work, he said. "The math doesn't work." In part, that is why he and his team decided to rent their own U-Haul instead of hiring outside contractors, he added, saying, "We thought we're going to save a little bit of money."



The puppets don't "have any value for these thieves," their creator, Hamid Rahmanian, said through tears. Credit...Richard Termine

Just after 8:30 p.m. on Sunday, he and his team loaded their wares into the truck, which was parked near the Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture, where Sunday's show was held. They drove it less than a mile to the Comfort Inn, where they arrived at 9:13 p.m., Rahmanian said, noting he had felt anxious, given San Francisco's reputation for crime, but told himself it was going to be fine in a parking lot.

The next morning, the truck had disappeared.

U-Haul did not immediately respond to requests for comment on Tuesday evening, but Rahmanian said that after the truck was stolen, the company had told him that it was

not fitted with a GPS device and that it could not be located. Choice Hotels, which manages the Comfort Inn, also did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Abbas Milani, a professor of Iranian studies at Stanford University, said in an email that Rahmanian's work offered an "antidote to the dangerous delusions of stereotypes" through an empathetic portrayal of Iranian culture. Rahmanian's adaptations of the *Shanameh*, he added, "offered a rich tapestry of the joyous, even epicurean culture of Iran."

Rahmanian said he was particularly buoyed on Sunday evening, as the audience lingered in the lobby to discuss the show – which begins with a warrior imploring two armies to stop fighting. Two of the enemies then fall in love, he said, noting that "Song of the North" was ultimately a tale of forgiveness.

It felt "cosmic," he added, to wake up the next morning to find that even art didn't appear to be safe from the ugliness of the world. "It doesn't have any value for these thieves," he said through tears on Tuesday evening, before the truck was located. "They're going to open it up and realize, oh my god, it's just puppets."

On Tuesday, Rahmanian said he would not press charges against those who stole the truck. He added, "I forgive you."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/25/us/hamid-rahmanian-puppets-stolen-san-francisco.html>