

# The Washington Post

THEATER

## These actors use 483 shadow puppets to tell an epic story

The multimedia stage show ‘Song of the North’ is inspired by a 1,000-year-old Iranian tale that has contemporary relevance

By Celia Wren  
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“Song of the North” is adapted from the “Shahnameh (Book of Kings)”, an epic from A.D. 1010 that has been credited with keeping the Persian language alive. (Richard Termine)

With 483 shadow puppets — not to mention actors, masks and 208 animated backgrounds — “Song of the North” is no bare-bones production.

“It is like a Swiss watch backstage,” says Hamid Rahmanian, the Iranian-born artist and filmmaker who designed and directed the multimedia work, which plays at the Center for the Arts at George Mason University on Jan. 27, with a school-time student field trip

performance on Jan. 26. During the 83-minute show, the nine ensemble members switch between puppets and props with razor-precise timing.

A tale of a resourceful heroine who strives to avert a war while rescuing the man she loves from danger, “Song of the North” adapts and dramatizes part of the “Shahnameh (Book of Kings),” a 1,000-year-old epic. Written in verse by Abolqasem Ferdowsi, who drew on myth and history and completed decades of work on the project in A.D. 1010, the “Shahnameh” has been credited with keeping the Persian language alive.

“The ‘Shahnameh’ is like ‘The Iliad’ and ‘The Odyssey’ for Iranians,” but has even more contemporary relevance than those works, the 55-year-old Rahmanian observes. When protests gain traction in Iran, as in the case of the “woman, life, freedom” movement that surged in 2022, references to the “Shahnameh” are part of the public discourse, he says.

He believes that in the West, where the saga is less known, its stories can add nuance to an image of Iran that is often one-sided and focused on politics. “Iran is like a symphony — but in the West, you only hear one note from the symphony, and it is not a very happy note,” says Rahmanian, who came to the United States in 1993, earned a degree in computer animation from the Pratt Institute and later became a Guggenheim fellow.



Hamid Rahmanian worked for Disney before designing and directing “Song of the North.”  
(Richard Termine)

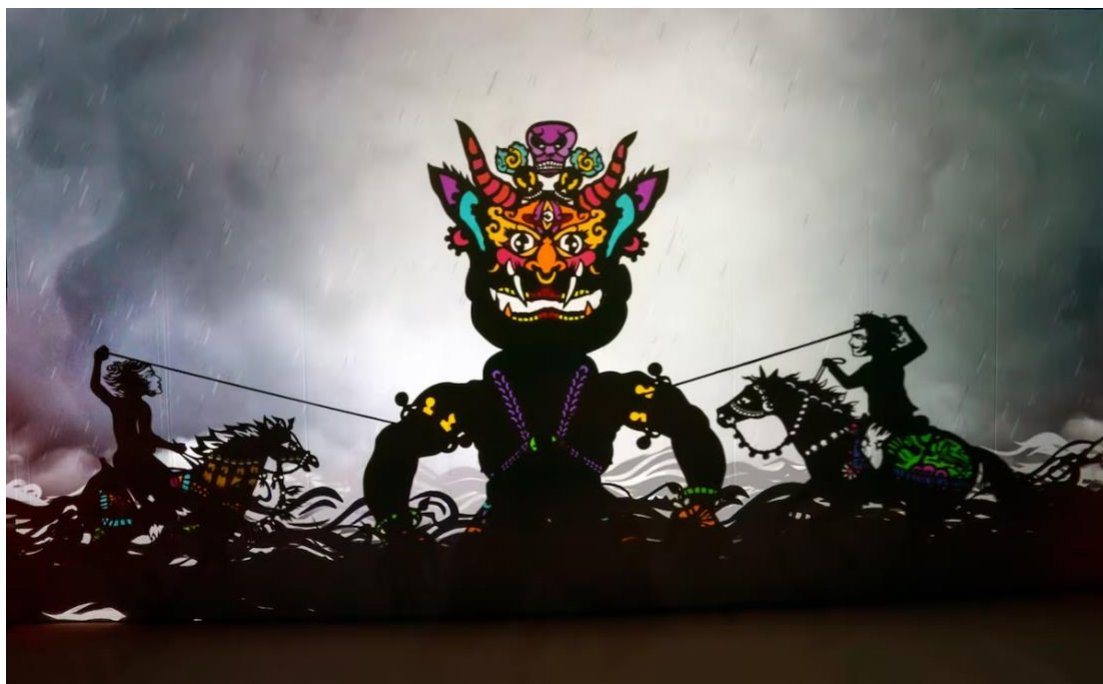
For a while, he worked for Disney on “Tarzan,” among other movies. After leaving the Mouse House, he started his own production company and made films such as 2005’s

“Day Break,” a drama about capital punishment in Iran that premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival.

But in recent years, he has made it his mission to expand Western audiences’ familiarity with the “Shahnameh,” through projects including a 600-page art-book retelling, which he designed and illustrated, with text translated and adapted by Ahmad Sadri; the award-winning pop-up book “Zahhak: The Legend of the Serpent King,” created with paper engineer Simon Arizpe; and an immersive “Shahnameh” audiobook featuring an introduction by Francis Ford Coppola. Rahmanian’s wife, Melissa Hibbard, has been his regular collaborator.

About a decade ago, Rahmanian began to focus on theatrical productions, in part because they were relatively cost-effective, but also because he saw a way to use his design and filmmaking skills to distinctive effect. With works like 2016’s cinematic shadow play “Feathers of Fire: A Persian Epic” and “Song of the North,” he wanted to create art that would grab attention.

“Song of the North” and “Feathers of Fire” open a vista onto Persian culture and history while also revealing the universality of the “Shahnameh” source material, says Nahid Siamdoust, the author of “Soundtrack of the Revolution: The Politics of Music in Iran,” who is on the faculty at the University of Texas at Austin. The productions explore “stories with issues that matter to all of humanity, about grief, loss, intrigue,” Siamdoust says, adding that “Song of the North,” with its female protagonist and message about peace, feels especially resonant now, at a time of international conflict and following the upswing of the “woman, life, freedom” protests.



The visuals in “Song of the North” are inspired by old coins, miniature paintings, historical stone carvings and other imagery. (Richard Termine)

Featuring an original score by Iranian-born composer Loga Ramin Torkian, and with visuals inspired by old coins, miniature paintings, historical stone carvings and other imagery from the region, “Song of the North” debuted in Paris in 2022 and had its U.S. premiere later that year at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

But the show almost didn’t make it to 2024. In October, while Rahmanian and his colleagues were on the West Coast for performances, their U-Haul was stolen from a parking spot at a San Francisco Comfort Inn. The vehicle was later recovered, but the thieves had stolen, destroyed or damaged puppets, costumes, masks and specialized technical equipment.

Rahmanian briefly despaired. But a GoFundMe campaign earned over \$100,000 for recovery costs. The generosity was “beyond imagination,” he says.

The donations enabled him and his team to speedily rebuild the production, in time for this winter’s touring performances. With the donors’ faith in his work giving him additional incentive, he resolved to continue sharing Persian and Iranian culture as best he can.

“America is my host, and I feel I need to give back,” he says.

### **If you go**

#### **Song of the North**

Center for the Arts at George Mason University, 4373 Mason Pond Dr., Fairfax. 703-993-2787. [cfa.gmu.edu](http://cfa.gmu.edu).

**Dates:** Jan. 27; free school-time student field trip performance on Jan. 26 (registration required).

**Prices:** \$29-\$48; half-price for youth through Grade 12.