

Song of the North. Created and directed by Hamid Rahmanian. Music by Ramin Torkian, featuring vocalist Azam Ali. OZ Theatre, Nashville, Tennessee, 20 April, 2024.

As battle sounds fill the OZ Theatre in Nashville, shadowy figures of soldiers and weapons materialize on a large screen, shrouded in the fog of war. This dramatic opening sets the stage for Hamid Rahmanian’s innovative shadow puppet theatre production, *Song of the North*, inspired by Ferdowsi’s tenth-century Persian epic, *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings)^[1].



Figure 1: The shadow figures of war are cast on the screen. (Photo: Richard Termine)

Song of the North is part of the KINGORAMA project, founded by Hamid Rahmanian and Melissa Hibbard, which produces cultural products based on *Shahnameh*. This is Rahmanian’s third theatrical production following the award-winning *Feathers of Fire*,^[2] which toured internationally from 2016 to 2019. As an Iranian scholar, I had the unique chance to experience and learn about the production from multiple angles: watching it

once from the front of the stage, then from backstage, followed by a conversation with the director. These diverse perspectives revealed the production's multiple layers: *Song of the North* is simultaneously an accessible adaptation of an ancient Iranian story for a contemporary global audience and a showcase of multicultural teamwork using an innovative blend of traditional shadow theatre and cinematic techniques. Additionally, the production serves as a cultural ambassador, challenging stigmas about Iran and subtly commenting on current events, particularly women's rights within the country.

The afternoon performance at the Oz Theatre in Nashville had a full house, with spectators of all ages, but mostly families with children. The 80-minute performance was a visual feast: on the shadow screen, sharp, colorful swirling patterns, reminiscent of Persian miniatures, created the illusion of animation, made all the more magical by the knowledge that these mercurial, two-dimensional images were actually live-action puppets (a fact the OZ artistic director revealed before the performance began). Observing from backstage revealed the impressive technical complexity required to produce this spectacle. Nearly 2,000 light and sound cues, managed through Q-Lab 4, orchestrated the intricate choreography of performers, puppets, and projections. Despite the performers' fast-paced management of multiple characters in narrow bands of light, their interactions with puppets and props reflected a respect in handling them, similar to how one might treat sacred objects.



Figure 2: A view of backstage. Projections are set up with performers manipulating props and puppets. Light lines on the floor mark safe areas for the performers where their shadows won't project on the screen. (Photo: Richard Termine)

The performance opened with a scene of war, reflecting common stereotypes about ongoing conflict in Middle Eastern countries perpetuated by media portrayals. However, this characterization didn't last long. On the shadow screen, the legendary Iranian hero, Rostam, emerging as narrator, stops the war, and promises a love story. This unexpected shift aligns with Rahmanian's belief that sharing stories rooted in a nation's culture can break stigmas and reshape perceptions. The war scene transitioned into a love story between Bizhan, an Iranian Knight, and Manizhe, a Turanian Princess. This love affair creates numerous challenges for them, as it posed a political risk to the leaders of both nations. The rest of the play narrates the courageous tale of Manijeh, who utilizes her strengths to rescue Bijan and avert a war.

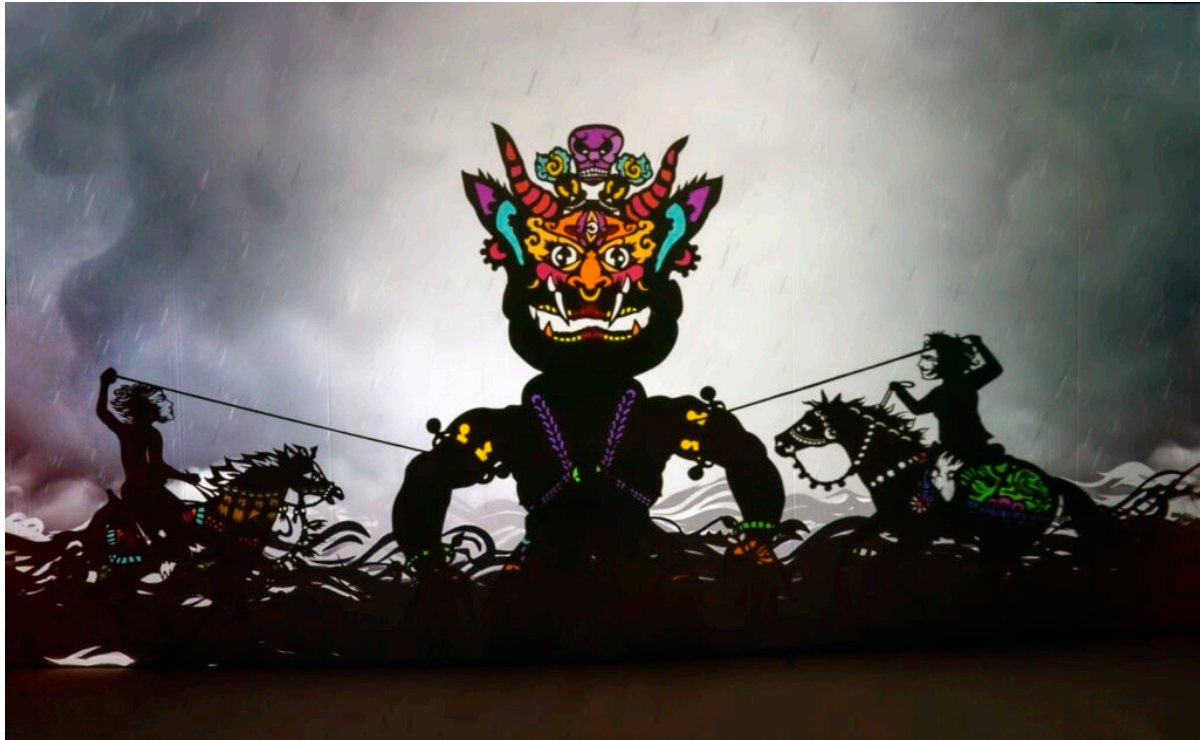


Figure 3: The sea scene features the sharp shadow figure of Akvan Demon at the center, with Bizhan and Manizheh engaged in a struggle to overcome him. (Photo: Richard Termine)

The production employed a blend of actors and puppets to create a film-like experience for the audience. Key characters, like Bizhan, Manizheh, and Rostam, were brought to life by actors wearing headpieces that visually matched the profiles of their corresponding puppets so that they could project comparable images in their own shadows on the screen. In addition to the actors, each character was represented by multiple puppets of varying sizes, allowing the performers to create cinematic effects such as zooming in and out, perspective shifts, and panning by adjusting their positions relative to the projector and the screen. The transitions between scenes were seamless, which I learned was afforded by the way the company cleverly used one projector to illuminate the current scene while preparing the next scene's frame and puppets in front of a second projector. The projectors also displayed actual pre-recorded animations that made the scenery come to life. However, these animated moments were brief compared to the predominance of handcrafted frames, which maintained the show's spirit of traditional live puppetry.



Figure 4: A view of backstage. The actor portraying Zal stands close to the curtain, while the actress portraying Simorgh stands farther back, near the projection, a technique that creates shadows of different scales. (Photo: Richard Termine)

In this adaptation, Rahmanian made a particularly significant departure from *Shahnameh* by transforming the character of Manizheh from an erotic figure into one whose singing gives her agency. In the original story, Manizheh uses her erotic power to overcome challenges; in *Song of the North*, Manizheh uses her voice. For example, in one scene, she uses a haunting song to lull her guard to sleep after he scolds her for practicing archery. In the show at the Oz Theatre, Ali's powerful vocal performance (beautifully woven through Torkorian's recorded composition) became central to the narrative, giving Manizheh enhanced agency and influence. This offered a subtle comment on Iran's post-1979 ban on women singers, aligning the production with both historical and contemporary discussions on women's rights in Iran. Toning down the erotic elements also made the play more family friendly.

Rahmanian's commitment to authentically representing the Persian soul of the story was apparent in every aspect of the production. In our conversation, he emphasized his identity not as an Iranian American but as an Iranian living in America and explained his dedication to preserving and presenting Iranian culture genuinely, particularly in light of the stigmas often associated with Iran in Western media. Rahmanian emphasized the importance of having Iranian designers to represent the visual culture accurately. Throughout the performance, the all-Iranian design team drew inspiration from Sassanid-era coins for character designs, ensuring even Manizheh's portrayal reflected her Turkmenistan origins through specific physical features. Complementing the visual spectacle was the original score by Iranian composer Ramin Torkian, which struck me, as an Iranian, as both nostalgic and original in its tone and instrumentation. Interestingly, I overheard a non-Iranian spectator asking which app they could use to find the music, as they were fascinated by this type of sound.

The audience's appreciation of the production was evident from their prolonged standing ovation and the fact that, remarkably, not a single audience member appeared to leave before the Q&A session. During that session, several children asked about how the puppets and voices worked, and the cast brought their headpieces onto the stage to demonstrate how they manually created their cinematic effects. Meanwhile, adults posed more dramaturgical questions, particularly about the production's relation to the current "Woman, Life, Freedom"^[3] movement in Iran, as all the cast wore T-shirts bearing the slogan. Rahmanian explained that women's empowerment is a common theme in the *Shahnameh*, exemplified by strong female characters like Manizheh. Although *Song of the North* was written before that movement, it highlights this aspect of Iranian culture.

Song of the North is a highly engaging production that merges traditional Iranian storytelling with modern cinematic techniques. A compelling adaptation of the *Shahnameh*, it presents a narrative that crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries through powerful visuals. The production's careful attention to authenticity in its imagery and musical elements, while updating a classic tale, provided insight into Iran's

cultural heritage and engaged with relevant socio-political themes. This work highlights puppetry's evolving role in fostering cross-cultural understanding and reimagining traditional narratives for today's audiences.

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Notes

[1] Ferdowsi's tenth-century Persian epic, *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), recounts the historical and mythological past of Persia from the creation of the world to the Islamic conquest in the seventh century. This epic poem, spanning over 50,000 verses, celebrates themes of heroism, loyalty, and the struggle between good and evil, and serves as a cornerstone of Persian literature.

[2] Recipient of the 2019 UNIMA-USA award for excellence in live performance and design.

[3] The movement that is sparked in Iran by the death of Mahsa Amini while she was in the custody of morality police because of what the state calls improper Hijab.