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# Persian Heritage

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## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Over the past three years the world has been impacted by two major events, September 11th and the US-Iraqi war. After September 11th, because of the atrocities of that day, the world was united with the U.S. in its efforts in Afghanistan to avenge the tragedy. This war, however, has left the US divided with its allies, more divided with its non-allies and with its citizens. This division did not stop at the governmental levels. It has extended to relations between friends and family. Issues regarding the war were discussed at dinner tables and ended in heated debates.

This war created a sense of urgency that continues to hover over us. No one regardless of age was spared from its emotions. We were all anxious and insecure and continue to be. E-mails flowed by the hundreds; citizens of the world were drowned with information.

The war from pre to post took over our lives with no escape route. There was a rush for a story and each story had a different interpretation. Each newsperson waged a bet on when it would begin, when it would end and how many would die.

Yes, the egregious acts of September 11th that brought global revenge were being avenged for a second time, but this time with emotions spent on anger rather than loss.

All of this caused me to remember another war that occurred in the 80s, the war between Iraq and Iran. It was a war that by some statements killed more than one million Iranians and 500,000 Iraqis, one that displaced 4-5 million people from their homes and one that killed or severely injured thousands of Iranian and Iraqi Kurds by chemical, bacterial and mustard gas, a.k.a., weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Some of these poor victims were flown all over the world and used for research on the after effects of WMD.

So many suffered and the world paid little attention. So many crimes against humanity existed and the world did not listen. There were no heads of state agitated over the Iran-Iraq war as they are over this war ... why? Why was there such disparity in the reactions? Were the lives lost on September 11th more valuable than those lost in the Iran-Iraq war and other wars? Nobel Peace Prize winners, antiwar proponents lined the streets of the world protesting this war, where were they in the 80s.

It is sad to think that some human life is considered more valuable than others, that some human life is considered replaceable. It is sad to think that some American-Iranians supported that war. They supported it from a "safe haven." They supported it thinking that a win would allow them to return to Iran. They supported a war and watched from their "safe havens" as innocent victims from both countries died. Imagine people celebrating over the deaths of their own. There are no winners in a war; it is simply the stronger that survives. And yet during this war we saw crowds of Iraqi's in the streets of Michigan and Canada in celebration of Saddam's downfall. What was forgotten by those celebrating was the price that was paid. Thousands of their own people were killed in the process defending their families, their homes their soil while the only danger these protestors and celebrators faced was the end of a police baton. Artifacts that represented their history and cultures were crumbled by a few bombs.

No, my friends, a victory in a war should not be followed by lifting champagne glasses. The end of a war should be looked at with relief and grief, relief that no one else will die and grief over those who did, grief over the things lost, and grief over what will never be again. As one very brave Iraqi citizen from Canada put it "this is not the collapse of a regime it is the collapse of your country and your fellow countrymen."

While war is something to avoid at all costs, it may be unavoidable. When it is waged, we must place the same value on all the victims of the battle, whether soldier or civilian. Those who declare these wars are not the ones that suffer from its daily effects. The civilians are left with the physical and emotional pain and suffering for generations to come.

I wanted at all costs to ignore this topic, but it has also consumed me. One day while driving to work I turned on the radio to a talk show. The program was discussing the up and coming war and how to protect Americans abroad specifically the student population. It was suggested that the American not bring attention to him or herself; that



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they should introduce themselves as Canadians or any other nationality that matched their skin color or language.

During the program there was a call from a young man who was obviously angered by what he had just heard. The caller stated the following "I will not deny my nationality. I am proud to be an American and willing to pay the consequences pro or con for the privilege of being an American. To deny who we are is to admit a weakness. Instead of denying that we are Americans I believe that it is in our best interest to educate our host country on what it means to be an American. They need to understand, as we need to understand, that it is not the common population that controls these political decisions or controls the broader aspects of a nation's government. We must let them know that Americans like most people are strong and loving, caring and compassionate. To be an American is to be from a nation made up of many cultures and many political opinions. It is not we the citizens but the government who is being labeled "the Great Satan."

After hearing this young man's determination and patriotism, I had no desire to hear another thing. I turned off the ra-

dio. What insight he had. I cannot understand why the world gets so confused. Why is the world so willing to believe that the grief one person suffers in one nation is not felt in the same way by another person in another nation? The answer is because the people of the world are judged by and grouped by the actions of their government. Look how the Iranian immigrant has suffered emotionally and physically because of this. During the hostage taking, regardless of where they lived, Iranians were considered to be part of that movement. No one was given an opportunity to voice their opinion. This caused so many Iranians to change their names or identity themselves as French, Spanish, Armenian, Turkish even Greek.

No one recognized the reason so many left Iran to avoid horrific consequences. They fled without their wealth, were stripped of their titles all in an effort to avoid a regime. To their amazement however, they found the victimization they fled from waited for them in their new home. This has also caused the dreams of parents to be reunited with their children who left Iran never to be actualized. For some, the long line waiting for visas at

embassies was to be their last line.

These difficulties suffered by the Iranians as a result of the hostage did subside until the horrific morning of September 11th, a day that took innocent lives in buildings and planes, and the day that was to be the rebirth of discrimination against all Middle-Easterners. Once again we were grouped. It did not matter that none of the terrorists were of Iranian heritage. Once again Iranians were drawn into a "Muslim" conflict and given a "prominent" position on the "axis of evil." Once again Iranians were deported or jailed because of green card flaws that were once overlooked.

As I stated at the beginning of this editorial, this war has impacted the world. Once again we as citizens are the victims. Because of the global impact of this war, maybe this could be the time for the world citizens to extend their hands in friendship, peace and harmony. This could be the time that with hands held together, we could pull the world closer and create a new weapon of mass destruction whose power can erase the selfishness of a few... AND then again, maybe I am daydreaming.

*Shahksh Alavi*

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**T**hank you for the opportunity to speak to you today on the subject of the media with a focus on Iranian media outside of Iran

I am here representing *Persian Heritage* magazine. This magazine would not be in existence without a dedicated staff, subscribers and advertisers.

The idea for this magazine was born in my mind way back in 1946 when I was about seven years old. I loved current events and history and read any book or publication I could find. Eventually radio and television were added to my sources.

In the 60s, I began my immigration to the United States, with a first stop in England. While there I was introduced to a variety of new publications, television programs and radio stations. During this period I also began to realize the power contained by the media on our lives and how this was accomplished.

I was on a trip to England, in 1980, when Saddam Hussein first invaded Iran, Abadan and Khorramshahr. It remains a vivid memory. After hearing the news I rushed to the newsstands to buy every paper available. When I returned to my hotel room, I turned on the radio and television and spread the papers on the bed trying to take in as much information as possible. My heart pounded as I viewed the Iraqi soldiers penetrating Iran and the collapse of Khuzestan.

Shortly after the war began I left for the States. I believed there would be an abundance of information on the war but was sadly surprised. The Iran-Iraq War was mentioned only in passing. I felt so detached from the war so I rushed to Chinatown to see if I could buy a short wave radio. I had to walk all over the store to tune into a news station that covered the war. Finally I found one. Immediately I was relieved but then I thought about the other Iranians living outside of Iran who did not have the luxury of a short wave. Their only link to information was through a phone call or mail. It was then that the idea for an Iranian news magazine solidified in my mind.

As time passed Iran and Iranians were making front-page news, but instead of being depicted as we know one another to be, we were described in a horrible way. I was tortured by this and my children began to turn away from their heritage out of fear and embarrassment. I began to respect the Jewish community that had developed the media and political power necessary to defend themselves against such gross inaccuracies. I kept wondering how they achieved this and how we as a community could achieve the same power.

My idea for a news magazine could no longer be a thought it had to become a reality. After many years of planning and trial and error we launched the first edition of *Persian Heritage* in 1996. But I am not here to talk about myself or about *Persian Heritage*, I am here to discuss

lected, what should be censored from our ears and eyes, the movies we should see, what countries are enemies and what countries are our allies. Think about it for a moment, why do we purchase something, why are you here today? It is probably because you were exposed to the purchased product or this meeting through some form of media.

### HOW OFTEN IS THE MEDIA TRUTHFUL?

**O**n its face the media is truthful, but the facts often become distorted by omissions, editions, and by the views of the deliverer. It can also be distorted by the repetition of one image. For example photos of a battle are taken and the mission of the media is to convince you that the battle is extensive. If you are shown just one image chances are you won't be persuaded. If, however, that same image is repeatedly shown and shown from different angles you will be convinced. There is a line that the media must be careful not to cross, that is over exposure. Overexposure can negate what they are trying to accomplish because the audiences becomes so overwhelmed with the image that they think it is no longer believable or they be-

come bored. Thus repetition is one of the skills of successful media.

Media can build or destroy an image. It lures you in with a headline, but the article that follows is the exact opposite of what the headline depicted. In all of its forms commercial or otherwise the media is successful in its mission to inform but it remains plagued by inconsistencies, censorship, bias and destruction. Today these plagues are more plentiful and the results and consequences of them more severe, because it forces its listeners into an opinion rather than allowing them to form their own

Today media is a necessity and is the fuel that runs the engine of society. A good engine needs quality fuel to make it run

# IRANIAN MEDIA OUTSIDE OF IRAN

Shahrokh Ahkami

media, what it is, what it does and how it can be used in our community.

So then....

### WHAT IS THE MEDIA?

**M**edia for our purpose is defined as "that by which something is accomplished or some end is achieved.

Media is a tool used in conjunction with communication and allows an exchange of ideas or message. Media is what we live by today. It is why we act and converse. It controls our every move through direct or subliminal suggestion. The power of the media is beyond expectation. It controls everything in the world, who is

efficiently. Like wise society will run efficiently and productively if we receive qualitative rather than quantitative information. Too much information can leave us confused and force us to form uneducated opinions of the facts received.

Take a clothing closet for example. Is it not easy to figure out what to wear if you have a few pieces, pieces of good clothing. When the closet becomes cluttered, with impulsive purchases outside of what you are comfortable wearing, your decision becomes more difficult. You become frustrated and eventually pull out something that is comfortable and trustworthy. Soon the impulsive purchases are pushed aside and eventually discarded ... without being worn ... a pure waste.

Likewise, when there is too much programming and publications from which to choose we also become frustrated. We then return to those programs and publications that are comfortable and trustworthy and discard the new magazine bought on impulse. What I am afraid of is that these publications and programs are becoming less trustworthy and soon we will read, listen to or watch nothing. An uninformed society is a dangerous society.

The States and elsewhere are saturated with information showing us the great enemies of democracy, North Korea, China, Iraq and Iran. There is a far greater threat to democracy in America and a far bigger enemy. In his book, *Drive-By Journalism*, Arthur E. Rowe calls this enemy the "American rebel." The "rebel" is created by the media through distortion of its facts. It leaves the "rebel" with distrust both for government and press. The "rebel" therefore will act on a situation on emotion rather than on truth. This is dangerous!

Mr. Rowe also discusses the media and its earlier commitment to the "fairness doctrine." He believes that if this doctrine were followed today it could neutralize the "American rebel," by delivering truthful facts and opinions of both sides of an issue. But the media has not done this and thus the "rebel" develops, the citizen who wants America to be powerful, but doesn't know what price America has paid and what it has done to reach super power status.

More and more the media of today premises its programs on manipulated truths and realities for financial and political security, rather than on the straight facts.

It takes only a change in one word to alter a thought process. For instance, during the current war, soldiers discovered an

abundance of bones and skeletons in southern Iraq. All but one very powerful paper within the United States revealed the identity of the bones as Iranian soldiers who died during the Iraq-Iran War. What was the purpose behind their purposeful omission of the origin of the remains?

By now I am sure you are wondering what this has to do with the Iranian media: EVERYTHING! Our media has been a victim of bias, censoring, destruction and distortion and we have also been the perpetrator. Our media though honest in principal is misdirected. Instead of directing its' programming and publications to a younger generation outside of Iran they design their programs for the Iranian audience in Iran or at Iranians who left Iran in the 70s. One of these groups dreams of changes and the other dreams of returning to Iran.

I am not stating that it is wrong to have programs or articles for these audiences but they should not be saturated with them. When this happens their value is lost. What is worse is that we will lose the attention of the younger generation, and when they are lost, so is their Iranian identity. As the "American rebel" is the enemy of the States, the programs and publications that give only one point of view because of political and financial backing are the rebel to the Iranian media. Regardless of ones political, educational, or religious beliefs, in order to give credibility to a point of view you must implement the "fairness doctrine." If we do not, like the "American rebel" our credibility will be threatened and we will create the "Iranian rebel."

**WHAT DO WE DO TO CORRECT THIS AND HOW CAN WE USE THE MEDIA TO OUR ADVANTAGE?**

The answer, ladies and gentlemen, is simple: through a powerful and unified voice. When I use the word "united," I do not mean one publication, one television and radio station, one point of view I mean many publications, many television and radio stations many points of views. But all of these must have one unified voice on the issue of being Iranian — one voice that builds rather than destroys our image. This voice must be honest, unbiased, non destructive and respected. It must have these qualities in order to be heard. When we achieve this as a community it will easily reach the ears

of our younger generation Iranians and non Iranians. It should be a voice that makes those lost turn towards their heritage rather than away in embarrassment and shame.

We should take offense to these generalizations of Iranians, but we must also try to understand where these generalizations are conceived. It is in the media that has been used to insure that the world continues to view Iran as the enemy. And ... it has been a media successful in its mission.

A unified voice, for this purpose, will command attention when it declares repeatedly "I am of Iranian heritage, I am proud to be of Persian heritage and I will no longer stand for false general images to be printed about my heritage. Believe me though we think we are PERFECT, WE ARE NOT! No one, no country is. What I am saying is that the Iranian community must have a united voice to neutralize falsities and generalizations.

We as a community are exhilarated when we are recognized as a group. Take for example NoRouz. I can remember the feeling of satisfaction when the state of New Jersey recognized NoRouz. I was quick to print it. Do not misunderstand me I believe that this type of recognition is a step in the right direction, but we must not be misled. This type of recognition is short lived; it lasts only for the day of NoRouz. The remaining 364 days of the year the same people and legislators, acknowledging our existence at NoRouz, are delivering a disturbed and destructive image of us and the legislatures are developing new laws that prevent educational exchange programs and force us to be fingerprinted. So do not take these proclamations to mean acceptance. Not until every state recognizes NoRouz, not until every calendar marks March 21<sup>st</sup> as No Rouz can we consider ourselves assimilated in society. Look at the Bahai's. It was through hard work and determination that the calendars now mark the March 21<sup>st</sup> as the birth date of Baha. And, look at the Afro-Americans. They did not stop their mission with the passing of The Civil Rights Act. They knew that was only the beginning of their fight for equality, recognition and acceptance. They continue to make headway with a unified voice one that is strong enough to prevent one negative image of an Afro-American from becoming a generalized image as a group. It is time for us to be less idealistic and more passive aggressive.

The best weapon against bad media is



good media. Finding good media may be a difficult task, but it is not insurmountable.

Let's look now at some examples of the power of the media, the most recent is seen in the movement to change the name of the Persian Gulf. The media representing the change is powerful and has been able to rename the Persian Gulf without any significant ramifications. We as a community are outraged but how do we deliver this message in a civilized manner to the non-Iranian community. It is certainly not by e-mails shared with each other. It is certainly not by conversations in chat rooms and parties. Nor is it achieved with a few letters to the editor. These may have an impact, but ladies and gentlemen, that impact will not be felt by the people in charge, until long after the change has been implemented.

The message must be clear, researched, concise, and delivered by media that is respected. It must be delivered repeatedly. Today Iranians abroad and within are in a vulnerable positions and we must stop the daily chiseling away of our heritage.

Another example is the depiction of Iranians as bearded and head covered people beating themselves with a chain, burning the American flag and shouting "death to America." This was an image played over and over again during the revolution and intensified with the hostage taking. I ask you, did you see any Iranians in Canada demonstrating in the streets beating themselves with chains? I didn't; nor did I see it in the United States. But also painfully absent from the front page were demonstrations against these generalized images. Images of Iranians in Iran were applied to Iranians everywhere. The reason why you left Iran during that period did not diminish the hatred against us. Our weakness in combating these generalizations will in the long run be our demise. Our weakness will cause our defeat. We were afraid to protest because we did not have the power of the media or the politicians behind us.

Iran has been placed in the Axis of Evil with Korea and Iraq, and though we are led to believe that the "good and gentle people of these countries" are not included in this Axis, human nature cannot make the separation in identity. Are you not outraged by this? Are you not outraged by being associated with the September 11th tragedy — especially when there was not one Iranian among the terrorists?

My friends, a voice in the media is all we need to institute damage control.

A classic example of the lack of "damage control" is seen in the INFAMOUS

movie *Not Without My Daughter!* This movie grossly exaggerated the plight of one family. Iranians were depicted as hostile, dirty people without love or compassion. I don't know about you but every member of my Gochan family bathed daily.

Granted the movie had a short box office life, but in its short life it created a great deal of damage, which continues to day. Every time Ms. Betty Mahmoudi went on a talk show, America's image of Iranians was enforced. We were just short of being called savages.

We sat, watched and listened to her with open eyes and mouths. We debated amongst ourselves while our non-Persian friends and neighbors looked at us with disgust. But we had no publication television or radio program that we could use to clear this image.

Ladies and gentlemen, had there been one decent Iranian journal or television broadcast Ms. Mahmoudi could have been invited to speak. I can assure you that her story would have been more truthful and at the very least there would have been damage control.

This movie is used today to continue to inflict injury on the Iranian image. Every time something positive or negative happens in Iran or in the Iranian community outside of Iran the movie surfaces. It was shown during the soccer match between Iran and the United States. It was shown during the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy and prior to this war. It is used against the Iranian community as the holocaust is used to protect the Jewish community. This movie is meant to remind non-Iranians not to be fooled by the Iranian achievements and the positions they hold, not to be fooled by their wealth and knowledge not to be fooled by their acts of compassion or cries for help. The movie wants the general public to remember the hostages, remember what Iranians did to Betty Mahmoudi, to their own Shah and to their people!

Some of our present media is very close to becoming well respected in the field. But it is also in need of community support. We are a wealthy and educated community and therefore have the resources to accomplish this. This is our obligation to the Iranian community in and outside of Iran. We cannot afford to waste money on magazines and programs that are totally frivolous. We can't have programs that only give *ta-arouf* to a nauseating level or that only sell flags, concert tickets and carpets. Iranian media needs to be educated on the difference between gossip and news.

We must also learn as I have stated earlier that quality of programming is far more important than quantity. Good media does not come from someone who starts a television or radio station or publication overnight because they are wealthy enough to do so. It is the desire, financial backing and having qualified people producing the shows that will help us reach a higher media level. We must have people in charge whose goal is not to elevate themselves but rather elevate the entire community. We can no longer assume that someone else in the community will take care of public relations for us. That someone else ladies and gentleman are you in this audience and me standing in front of you. That someone else is the entire community.

How we accomplish this is up to you and I am open for suggestions. What I can tell you is that every extra dollar I have goes into *Persian Heritage* to keep it in print. When the cash is short my staff is quick to decline a salary. They are as dedicated as I am and I hope all of you are in making this publication as well as other publications and media forms respected within and outside of our community. One that can at least come close to providing valuable information to our community and those outside our community. I honestly, however, do not know how much longer this publication and other media forms out there can survive without outside financial support. It is upsetting to me that the Arab community, the Spanish community, most all other communities can achieve what is needed in the media, yet we fall short. The future of the Iranian community depends on all of us! ■

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## SUSAN POURFAR: THE REAL DEAL AND NOBODY'S TOKEN

Negar Ahkami

*Susan Pourfar is a gifted young actress to look out for. She has the presence and command of a stage actress beyond her years, and projects depth, intelligence as well as accessibility to her audience. The Brown-educated actress is the daughter of an Iranian father, Dr. Mohamad Pourfar, and an American mother, the late Jane Pourfar, both who recognized and supported her talents at a young age. Having just seen Ms. Pourfar's performance in **The Last Sunday** in June at the Century Center for the Performing Arts in Manhattan, it is easy to see why.*

**T**HE LAST SUNDAY IN JUNE is Jonathan Tolins' new play about a group of gay men overlooking the annual Gay Pride parade in New York City from a Greenwich Village apartment. Just before the lights dimmed, a young man seated next to me reading the *Playbill* pointed to the listing of Susan Pourfar as the only female cast-member. He cracked to his coterie of pretty-boy friends "they

had to put one woman in it...as a token!"

I nearly challenged my neighbor for this remark, in breach of the New York code of feigned disinterest in other people's conversations. For I had already read *The New York Times'* glowing review of Susan Pourfar's performance and had seen her goose-bump-inducing performance in *Turn of the Screw* to know that her role in the play would be anything but token. Nevertheless, I decided to wait until after the show to contradict my neighbor—both for my lack of spine and since it would be unfair to defend a performance that I had not yet seen. I learned this lesson a few years ago when I boasted to a former "boy"-friend that the bee-stung beauty featured in an episode of a popular TV drama was Iranian. After watching her wooden performance, my then-boyfriend (who is non-Iranian) turned to me and said mockingly, "tonight Americans learned one thing: that Iranian women can be bad actresses too."

Years later, I still want to have the last word: "BUT WE HAVE SUSAN POURFAR!" Susan Pourfar's performance in *The Last Sunday in June* spoke

for itself, and I did not need to utter a word to my neighbor in the audience in the end. She clearly left a strong impression during the short period of time that she was on stage. Her performance as Susan, a literary editor who is engaged to a gay man, was a convincing, sympathetic portrait of a cosmopolitan, self-aware woman who has learned the hard way about relationships. Ms. Pourfar has a small part but a pivotal one. Her thought-provoking (and at times laugh-out-loud funny) observations about gay culture and about her priorities in choosing a life partner were at the emotional center of the play, and drove home central points in the play's ongoing banter and debate about gay identity.

By the time Ms. Pourfar's character enters the drama, it is towards the end of the play and there has been a lot of build-up and speculation about this mystery woman who has chosen to marry a gay man. Like my neighbor in the audience, the roomful of gay male characters label and stereotype Susan before meeting her. They surmise that she must be fat, unattractive, or the token "fag hag" (slang for a heterosexual woman who befriends gay men) in order to be marrying James, an openly gay man. Before she even appears on stage, she is perceived as a threat to the survival of gay male identity and the struggle that gay men have had to endure to be open and proud of their sexuality.

From the time she enters the apartment until her exit, Susan takes the roomful of gay men (and presumably the audience) by surprise as a lovely, sharp, and downright cool chick with options, who, nonetheless, chooses to forgo physical love in favor of a partnership built on support and friendship. She is neither the stereotypical "fabulous" diva nor the homely-but-witty overweight female friend with cats. She is a believable, likeable, and very real character whose unique personal choice challenges the set of rules adopted by the gay community. She gives her audience (both actual and the characters in the play) a lot to chew on when she tells them, "The old rules and the new rules don't make sense. You have to make it up as you go along."

With all the expectations surrounding her character, one cannot help but think that a lesser performance would have disappointed the viewer and trivialized the central themes of the play. It is the sign of a strong performance that when Susan exits the apartment and stage, you are left

wanting more. You want to follow her out the door, exchange e-mail addresses, and arrange to meet her for coffee. The same male characters in the play that had prejudged her end up caring about what will happen to her; whether she will be happy with her choice. The man seated next to me, who expected a mere token character, laughed louder at Susan's comical remarks than anyone seated in my row. Ms. Pourfar holds her own in a cast of very talented and appealing actors, including Jonathan McClain, Peter Smith, David Turner, Arnie Burton, Donald Corren, Mark Setlock and Matthew Wilkas. With the strength of the cast and Jonathan Tolins' script, it is no wonder that this critically acclaimed play has moved to a bigger theater since it opened and has been extended indefinitely.

This play ought to be of interest to Iranians not only because of Ms. Pourfar's talent and strong performance, but also because of its sophisticated treatment of a minority culture. Although it is a play specific to concerns about White (non-ethnic) American gay men, it is universally about the struggle for preservation of a cultural identity that is fragile; and about ambivalence about cultural identity and the notion of pride. Moreover, it is a courageous example of a minority group critiquing itself and the attempts in popular culture to represent the community — specifically in gay theater, TV shows and film.

Budding Iranian filmmakers and writers who hope one day to address Iranian-American identity should take notes from this kind of astute treatment. As *The Last Sunday in June* points out, there are too many minority/ethnic dramas that do little more than legitimize and validate the minority identity by merely introducing the gamut of cultural "tokens" and "types" to the American mainstream. This type of work, which has existed in films about gays, African-Americans, Italian-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Indian-Americans, and other groups, does very little to defy stereotypes and to create meaningful representation. *The Last Sunday in June* — and Ms. Pourfar's character and performance as Susan — critically addressed and then moved well beyond such tokenization and stereotypes. ■

## NEGAR AHKAMI "NEW WORKS"

**The new works of artist Negar Ahkami were recently exhibited at the Open Studio at Empire State College's Studio Program. According to Negar, this exhibit shows her ability to create a space where both sides of her Iranian-American identity can coexist — albeit in a state of confrontation, tension and contradiction. Her paintings are emotional responses to what she has perceived as violations of Iranian culture and dignity in American media, politics and art history; as well as violations of human dignity in contemporary Iran.**

**Her work fuses together Iranian and American iconography and mythologies to underscore that they are part of the same story — not just her own story — but the same (or at least a very intertwined) art history, political history and legacy of cultural influences. It also synthesizes the symbolist, narrative, pattern-driven aspects of her Persian influences together with the more individual, spontaneous, raw, and psychological forms of expression that she associates with her Western influences.**





In his creative activity, Yari Ostovany deals at various levels with the phenomenon of cultural memory. Following his stream of consciousness, the artist revolves in cycles of paintings around themes that bear the mark of the myth and raise questions about the sense and origin of existence. Among these are the *Conference of the Birds* and the Icarus motif. The artist regards two further cycles as tributes to Goya and Ezra Pound, whose ideas have greatly influenced his abstract pictorial language. The *Conference of the Birds* refers to a classic of Sufi literature. It was composed by Farid al-Din Attar, one of those distinguished twelfth-century Persian Sufis who divided their time between teaching and literary activities. The hero of his famous book, the hoopoe bird,

internal enemies. Just thirty among them hold on to their objective, to find themselves at last in front of the gates of the mythical Simorgh. A blazing glow pervades them, cleansing them of all their previous deeds. And in this rebirth they recognize that they, the thirty birds (Persian: si-morgh), do not exist in separation of the great Simorgh but that he is in them as they are in Him. With the recognition of this fundamental unity, expressed in one of the most famous plays on words to exist in Persian literature, journey and book come to an end.

Yari Ostovany is not after a reproduction of this story in the form of an illustration or a symbolical representation. To put it in his own words: "In my work I strive to touch the poetics of existence, that

by the chromatic undertones that predominate in each particular case. Rich applications of color, underlayers that force their way into the foreground and a superposition of forms created by scratching, scraping or sketching, all convey notions of meaningfulness and significance. There is a cautious articulation of the need to manifest oneself in a public statement, to lay bare the inmost recesses of memory and to take the individual experience to a universal level. Surging, ostensibly organic shapes link up with formations of crosses; frantically expanding, impulsive movements coexist with geometrical patterns; the ornamental encounters the narrative, the diffuse the distinct form, all with a view to gauging and visualizing the various pos-

## *The Poetics of Existence: Paintings of Yari Ostovany*

*Original German Text:*

*Dr. Christoph Kivelitz (Bochum)*

*English Translation: Dr. Jaep Lameer (Paris)*



thinks and feels like a Sufi, for whom there is only one essential thing in life: the direct and unmediated grasp of the Divine. One day, as all known and unknown bird varieties inhabiting the earth get together and deliberate about the need of having their proper king, he knows what to do. For did the king not exist since long ago in the person of the highly seclusive Simorgh, the bird who was said to be as close to them as they were remote from him? The hoopoe bird declares himself to be willing to lead his fellow birds to him who is their sovereign, only the journey will be long and fraught with danger. Simorgh, obviously, symbolizes God, while the different bird varieties symbolize as many human types.

The journey takes the birds through seven mystical valleys, each representing a stage on the path to God, an inner state of the seeker of God, accompanied by hunger, thirst, heat, cold, and external and

which is not linear and rests above and beyond the confines of the geometrical logic." The paintings of the "Conference of the Birds"-cycle present themselves as concrete creations in which arrangements of color and form express autonomous empirical values. The artist does not make any statement in the sense of a message which the spectator, looking and reading, has to decipher through intuition or by employing his reason. In the design of his paintings he creates a reality that keeps on reshaping itself in the perception of the onlooker, finding ever-new expressions.

Using indissoluble, interwoven and interblending layers of colors, Yari Ostovany forms meditative spaces in which memories and representations unfold themselves as in a flow of consciousness. Vertical line progressions and scaled, horizontal structures contribute to the rhythmic organization of a perspective space whose ambience is determined

sibilities of pictorial, symbolic and emblematic representation.

Yari Ostovany regards his art as a strictly personal exploratory journey, as an experiment in which he attempts to identify and break through predominant and established modes of perception and thought. He understands his work as a dialogue, which, similar to the musical principle that structures the fugue, combines the superficial with the subcutaneous, opposed with parallel, and overlapping with merging layers of perception, all in an atmosphere of suspense. Having received his artistic training at art academies in the United States, he explores the cultural traditions of his homeland Iran as well as those of the Western world. Still, in his artistic work Yari Ostovany does not strive to achieve a synthesis between contrasting or defining characteristics of Persian and Western art. Instead, he endeavors to identify potentially fundamental, abstract cultural patterns in their respective visual vocabularies.

The thematic and aesthetic relations which the artist brings to surface in the course of his analysis are developed into a form of expression that has no emblematic bearing upon their respective cultural contexts; rather, while being equally embedded in both of them, its means and orientations are distinct in one and the other case. Much like Jewish art, Persian Islamic art has been decisively influenced by the Old Testamentary prohibition to represent God in human form: "Thou shalt not make thyself an image...." There being thus no figurative representation, Islamic art is based on premises that are altogether different from those of antique and medieval Christian culture.<sup>1</sup> Artists focus rather on abstract means of creation: line, texture and color. It is only in exceptional cases that individual figures or emblems become the object of contemplation; the latter directs itself mostly towards surrounding arabesks or geometric enclosures. Ever since antiquity Western art has committed itself to the human form and the relation between a narrative and its pictorial representation.

Islamic art has given up this classical legacy to entrust poetics with the tale and its artistic expression. Through symbolic references, paintings are meant to allude to the world of Ideas. Where in classical culture the objective was to illustrate particular texts, here the onlooker is invited to freely follow his stream of consciousness within the framework set by a given theme. At a formal level, non-figurative Islamic art is determined by the pursuit of balance, control and proportion and as such, it is unmistakably self-referential. The stripping-away of visual characteristics, too, aims at a pictorial condensation which does not lead to the absence of a statement, but rather to a far-reaching, universal imagery, in the same way in which this came to pass in Western, abstract art since the days of Malevitch. This iconoclastic act annihilates the multifarious possibilities of distinction, leaving just the contrast unchanged. The lack of diversity in the inner structure is on a par with the absolute and comprehensive reality to which it refers. Reality, compressed into the notion of a limitless whole, ceases to have any conceivable, grammatical predicate. Malevitch's "suprematism" endeavors to reduce culture to its universal, cosmic truths, which is why it expunges all distinctive characteristics: "The creative act, however, has limits nor restrictions. Like the universe, it is boundless in its exer-

cise, and on that account it can arrive at 'nothingness' and 'eternal rest.'"

In nineteen-fifties' and -sixties' North American art, the "Abstract Paintings" of Ad Reinhardt, in which primary colors almost dissolve into the indistinctness of a black surface, correspond to Malevitch's "White Square on a White Surface". The post-second world war American artist, too, aims for the Absolute: "The one and only criterion in art is unity and beauty, exactitude and purity, abstraction and delicacy. The one and only thing that can be said of perfect art is breathlessness, lifelessness, deathlessness, meaninglessness, formlessness, spacelessness, and timelessness. That is forever the aim and the outcome of art." This particular claim, however, directs itself at an all-encompassing whole in which the idea of God has been preserved in a profane way. Something divine, conceptually incomprehensible, yet intuitively known or sensed is supposed to reveal itself to the onlooker in a pre- or else, meta-linguistic act of apprehension.

But it is precisely here, that Yari Ostovany introduces a doubt. The mere act of negating any extra-pictorial relation is hardly capable of clarifying the Lost Origin in the way of a catharsis. He thus starts out on a careful search for traces, in which hieroglyphic, pictorial or symbolic vestiges are made visible in an almost shadow-like way as he strives to delineate potentially new orientations and frames of reference in the chaotic texture. Using a multitude of symbolic arrangements, he uncovers the latter as in a flow of consciousness, to himself and to the onlooker alike. The longing for an origin takes the onlooker with every painting to different recesses of memory, thus lending it ever-new perspectives. The interpretation of the paintings and their symbols takes place in a spiral movement, which tends towards an axis and a final point without ever being able to attain either one of them. Thus we find ourselves in a situation where we have to verbalize the conceptual contents of the paintings while the latter escape our rational, geometric logic. This contradictory plight is certainly bearable.

Bochum, Germany, 2002

\* Translator's note: Even though the author's remarks on Islamic art in general are well taken, it is important to observe that Iran represents an exception to the artistic tradition of the Islamic world as a whole. Indeed, throughout the centuries, Persian artists have never broken with the pre-Islamic figurative tradition of the Sassanid (224-642 A.D.), who were conquered by Muslim armies in the early days of Islam.

## DESPAIR

A. M. Kafai

(Translated from French)

*Those  
who abandoned  
their homeland in distress  
They fell in exile  
in a pool of stress  
Enchained  
they remained  
in the prison of sorrow  
Disgraced  
they lived there  
with no tomorrow  
Grief  
befriended them  
till they took  
their last breath  
Remorse  
cut their heart  
till they bled to death.*

## WHERE IS MY POEM

Shahzad K. Farzad

*I gave away my poem  
the one, the only one  
that I had written in  
my native language — Farsi  
the language of my mother,  
grandmother, aunts and uncles  
the language I spoke with  
the kids in my neighborhood  
and I received awards at school  
for knowing every corner of it well  
the poem that had all the words  
that came easily to me  
and I wrote it for my daughter  
to sleep calm at night  
it was a family poem and  
it wasn't even typed  
I gave it away to someone  
who brought me the memory.*

# IRANIAN SATELLITE TV CHANNELS AS CULTURAL MIRRORS

Yahya R. Kamalipour

*You talk in whispers of my madness,  
But look beyond my babbling science  
To the asylum of truth, I want to say.  
Look at me with my containing head  
Topping my dervish cloak, do I remind  
You of someone you think you know?*

Jalaluddin Rumi, *Divan* 1486

One day, a professor was giving a lecture about a topic. At some point, an attentive student raises his hand and asks, "Excuse me, what do you mean by what you just said?" The professor pauses and responds, "It all depends!" and goes on. A bit later, the same student asks, "Excuse me, I still don't understand. What do you mean by saying it all depends?" The professor pauses and responds, "It depends on where you stand!" and he goes on. For the third time, the persistent student asks, "Excuse me, I still don't understand. What do you mean by saying it all depends on where I stand?" The professor responds, "It all depends on where you stand and how you look at a given situation—it's all a matter of perspective! Perhaps one of the reasons that you miss my point is that you interrupt more than listen!"

Indeed, in our increasingly complex and high-tech global village, there are no "single or simple" answers to a myriad of social, political, economic, and environmental problems. Individuals or groups look at any given problem, opportunity, or situation through their own lenses which are usually tainted (heavily or lightly) with their past experience, social and political affiliation, religion, sex, education, and economic status. And, of course, self-interest often (if not always) plays a key role in practically all human interactions and nations' domestic and foreign policies. In general, two questions prevail, "What's in it for me?" and "What do I gain or lose?" to determine the level of engagement or lack of engagement in any given affair for individuals, groups, or nations. Furthermore, the strongest motives in any human action or inaction are "self-interest" and "self-protection," and the formula, used in practically all human affairs, is "who gets what, against whom, at what price."

With this said, I would like to share some of my observations about the increasingly popular Iranian satellite TVs in the U.S. and abroad. As of this writing, 14 satellite channels are in operation of which Jaam-e-Jam 2 is based in Iran, Rang-A-Rang in Washington, DC, and Appadana International in San Francisco. There are also 9 stations based in Los Angeles, no doubt

adding to the feeling of the place as little Iran (to wit: the name Irangeles or Tehrangeles). They are Melli TV, NITV (National Iranian Television), Pars TV, Tapes TV, Iran TV, Channel One, Jaam-e-Jam International, Azadi TV, and Tamasha or International Persian Network (IPN). Two additional channels, Raga-A-Rang and Persian News Network (PNN) in New York will begin broadcasting soon, bringing the total number of Iranian satellite TV programming to 13 channels in the U.S., compared to only 6 domestic TV channels in Iran. I have not had an opportunity to view their entire set of programs, therefore, my observations are based on a random viewing of their offerings, particularly in late evening and on weekend. Practically, all US-based satellite channels broadcast their programs "live" for 12 hours. The live broadcasts are recorded and then repeated for another 12 hours, therefore qualifying them as 24-hour broadcast channels. In view of the time differences between the U.S., Europe, and Iran, this way of broadcasting makes sense because it enables the audience, in different continents, to view the various programs and channels during a convenient time period.

It is not easy to categorize the existing 11 US-based satellite channels: six of these, namely, NITV, Azadi TV, Pars TV, Channel One, Melli TV, and Jaam-e-Jam International, are in favor of monarchy in Iran; three of them, namely, Tapes TV, Iran TV, and Tamasha are mainly commercial; one, Raga-A-Rang in DC, tends to challenge the monarchists, and finally, Appadana, is a commercial-political operation. However, most oppose the clerical regime in Iran—some quite vehemently, such as Azadi and NITV. All, except Azadi, air a significant number of commercials. Reportedly, in defiance of the government, Iranian households equipped with rooftop satellite dishes, illegal in Iran, can view seven of the US-based TV channels. Due to the increasing popularity of satellite TV viewing, the Iranian Government is taking steps toward disrupting the signal electronically—a formidable task that may cause all sorts of interference in the country's telecommunication networks.

Today, the Iranian air space is electronically invaded by numerous invisible radio, TV, and satellite signals that originate from the U.S. and other countries around the world. For instance, in December 2002, Radio Farda (Radio Tomorrow), financed by the American government, inaugurated its 24-hour music and news programming in Persian aimed at the Iranian youth. Reportedly, Radio Farda has been successful in capturing the attention of a sizable audience in Iran. These signals, along with the Internet, facsimiles, and wireless telephones, have electronically connected the people of Iran to the rest of the global village. It is through the marvels of these communication technologies that the physical boundaries of nation-states have been rendered all the more permeable and amorphous as frequencies bridge the distance between the Iranians all over the world. Iranian.com, Gooya.com, Iran-emrooz.de, and Payvand.com are such important sources of news and information in the wheel of global interconnectedness. These channels of communication present a unique opportunity to the Iranians throughout the world, and within Iran, to be in constant touch with one another and actively participate in discussions related to the personal and global concerns, and the social, political, economic, and cultural issues that touch their lives. In other words, these channels, which include the satellite TV channels, have the potential to facilitate constructive dialogue, enhance viewers' knowledge and awareness, and shorten the cultural and political distances within and without Iran. To quote Reuel Howe (*The Miracle of Dialogue*),



"It is through dialogue that [humans] accomplish the miracle of personhood and community." And yet, alas, the political agenda espoused by the various satellite channels, often in competition with one another, diminish from the collective good that they can otherwise do.

In the following enumerated list, let me share some of my observations and comments:

**Monologue vs. Dialogue:** Most of the programs on the Iranian satellite channels qualify as "visual radio," not television. They invariably consist of a host or "talking head," who sits behind a desk and engages in a monologue (a lengthy talk given by one person) rather than a dialogue (a conversation in which two or more people freely exchange ideas). The desk is often adorned with flowers, the Iranian flag with the lion and sun insignia, papers (notes and faxes), a ubiquitous telephone, and a fax machine that spews written messages from viewers. In contrast, Azadi TV, perhaps the strongest opponent of the Islamic regime in Iran, does not have a telephone; it relies on a fax machine for audience feedback.

The telephone and the fax machine are the focal points of most of the Iranian satellite programs. Ostensibly, it is via the number of telephone calls or faxes that a channel gauges its levels of popularity and success—the number of viewer call-ins and faxes serve as a sort of de facto audience rating (barometer) for a given program. The host constantly monitor his/her telephone and fax machine and as soon as a button lights up or an incoming beep is heard, he/she interrupts his/her sentence, picks up the fax or delves into an verbal exchange that is often devoted to ta'arofs (oriental courtesy, flattery or oral niceties), followed by meaningless babble similar to the following script:

- Host:** *Dorood bar shoma ... befarmaid* (Greetings ... please go ahead)
- Caller:** *Allow ... allow ... (Hello... hello...)*
- Host:** *Baleh, befarmaid azizam shoma roye khat hasteed* (Yes dear, please go ahead, you are on the line)
- Caller:** *Mekhastam ba aghaye ... sohbat konam* (I would like to speak with Mr...)
- Host:** *Befarmaid khodam hastam* (Please go ahead, I am the person you are asking for)
- Caller:** *Salaam, aghaye..., khodoton hasteed?* (Hello, Mr. ..., it's really you?)
- Note:** (The volume of the caller's TV set is high, resulting in an annoying echo or feedback loop.)
- Host:** *Lotfan sedaye televizionro kam koneed ya azoon faseleh begireed* (Please turn down the volume on your TV set and then talk)
- Caller:** *Okay ... khoob shod?* (Okay... is this good?)
- Host:** *Bale, befarmaid azizam ... soali dashteed?* (Yes, go on my dear ... do you have a question?)
- Caller:** *Na man soali nadaram vali mikhastam begam ke man shomara mishenasam...man va shoma zamani hamkelasi boodeem* (No, I don't have a question but wanted to tell you that I know you...you and I used to be classmates!)
- Host:** *Rast meegi ... esmet chieh?* (Are you telling the truth...what's your name?)
- Caller:** *Man Ali hastam. Barnameh shomara kheili doost daaram ... dastat dard nakoneh* (I am Ali. I like you and your program very much...you are doing a wonderful job).

On the other hand, there are callers with a particular point of view and agenda. These callers usually avoid pleasantries and often go to another extreme by making unpleasant and offensive comments about the Iranian government, politicians, monarchists, celebrities, or radio/TV personalities. They tend to be loud, emotional, illogical, and accusatory. Their utterances delivered with great excitement and devoid of grammar and documentation.

**2. Public vs. Private:** The above telephone interactions, a standard entrée for viewer participation, are a routine activity that can provide significant insight into the Iranian culture, especially style of communication. The callers do not often recognize, nor respect, the boundaries between public and private spheres. They seem to forget the popular Persian idiom, "Har sokhan jaeeyo, har nokteh makani daarad" (Every remark has its place and every point its proper occasion). Clearly, conversations, similar to the ones noted above, do not belong on television or radio. Furthermore, the amount of time spent on either excessive "ta'arof," or accusations, is mind-boggling. It seems, at times, that viewers are eager to impress their favorite TV personalities by statements such as "...you are wonderful...your show is the best ... your channel is great...you are so beautiful ... I love you...my aunt loves you...the neighborhood loves you," and on and on... In return, the host, enjoying the flattery, responds in a similar fashion. "Ekhteyar daarid (you are in charge) ... man koocheke shoma hastam (I am miniscule in relation to you) ... nokere shoma hastam (I am your servant)...kheili lotf daarid (you are very kind)...mamnoon hastam az inhame ebraze ehsassat (thank you for your warm feelings toward me)...shoma gol hasteed (you are like a flower)... " and on and on! I am quite perplexed with the lack of connection between verbal pronouncements, especially empty "ta'arofs" and self-congratulations, and such routine practices among Iranians in general. In other words, the Iranians seem to be highly effective in rhetoric but highly ineffective in transforming words into action — I often wonder how this self-defeating, counter-productive, and useless communication practice can be tempered or even eliminated from daily conversations. Note the following exchanges:

#### Example 1:

- Host:** *Dorood bar shoma, befarmaid roye khat hasteed* (Greetings, go ahead you are on the line.)
- Caller:** *Agha shoma vel koneed in Reza Pahlaviro ... Shahanshahi kheili vaghteh ke mordeh* (Sir, forget Reza Pahlavi ... monarchy died a long time ago.)
- Host:** *Soali daarid?* (Do you have a question?)
- Caller:** *Bale, mikhastam bedanam ke kharje shomara ki mideh ... Reza, CIA, ya har do?* (Yes, I want to know who pays for your expenses ... Reza, CIA, or both of them?)
- Host:** *Bavar koneed hich kodoom* (Believe me, none of them.)
- Caller:** *Dorough nago ... ey vatan foroush* (Don't lie ... you are a traitor.)

#### Example 2:

- Host:** *Befarmaid azizam, shoma roye khat hasteed* (Go ahead my dear, you are on the line.)
- Caller:** *Bebinam kharje shomara jomhooriye eslami mideh?* (Does the Islamic Republic of Iran support you?)
- Host:** *Shoma madraki daarid ke in harfehaye bejara*

*mizeneed?* (Can you document your nonsense?)

**Caller:** *Madrak ehteyaj neest, az agehihaye shoma ma'loomeh*  
(There is no need for documentation. Your commercials show your connection)

Normally, the above exchanges tend to be short and if the callers engage in ranting (which is often the case), they are cut off. There are, of course, some intelligent and thoughtful comments by both viewers and hosts but, in general, both seem to have a fixed agenda and opinion. Such comments and ta'arofs, of course, limit the scope and depth of meaningful and frank conversation.

**Callers and Causes:** Practically, all of the satellite channels, except one (Azadi TV), accept telephone calls from their viewers. By my count, a caller can be one or more of the following types: (1) He calls to hear his own voice on TV; (2) She enunciates all sorts of ta'arofs and adulations without making a comment or asking a question; (3) He calls to let out his pent up emotions through insults while, at the same time proclaiming himself as the "lover of democracy;" (4) She agitates—she surfs the channels, listens to gossip, and reports it to the competing channels; (5) He calls to discredit everyone while falling into a self-congratulatory, all-knowing, mode; (6) She is confused and is waiting for someone to show her the right path; (7) He is alone and needs someone to talk to; (8) He pretends to be self-appointed representatives of a particular political, ethnic, or cultural group, if not the whole Iranian community; (9) She has a particular request—normally a music video; (10) He calls in order to support the return of monarchy and the late Shah's son, Reza Pahlavi, to his inherited throne, as if that by itself is the panacea; (11) He opposes monarchy and favors democracy, as if the two need to be mutually exclusive; (12) She calls to oppose the current Islamic regime; (13) He calls in support of the current Islamic regime but dislikes some aspects of it; (14) She thinks that without British and U.S. interference, nothing can be changed in Iran; (15) He thinks that the U.S. should attack Iran to topple the current regime; (16) She calls to glorify past history; (17) He calls to register his resentment for history; (18) She was imprisoned by the current regime and past regime; (19) He has no hope for himself or future of Iran; (20) She thinks that the British have always liked the Mullahs and are supporting them; (21) He believes that the current regime will collapse soon; (22) She calls to find out if the host of the program or a guest is related to someone she knew in high school; (23) He calls for help in not being deported from the U.S.; (24) She calls for help in entering the U.S.; and finally, (25) He calls to let the world know that he knows exactly what everyone else should do—he holds the key to a better future for Iran — and he should be on the program as often as long as possible.

In most cases the TV personalities and viewers alike manage to defeat logic and critical analysis; often succumbing to charged emotions. In other words, in competition between logic and emotion, emotion seems to overshadow logic. This is perhaps a major drawback in the Iranian style of communication that should be labeled, more accurately, as un-communication. It seems that everyone contradicts, discredits, or bypasses everyone else! There are, of course, exceptions. Clearly it is not only illogical, but highly emotional, when a concerned mother talks about her drug addicted daughter or son or a prisoner exposes his tortured past.

(continued)



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An Interview with

# TONY SAADAT



Dr. Kamshad Raiszadeh  
and Shahrokh Ahkami



*Tony Saadat wanted to be an engineer. Luckily for him, a bad economy led him away from engineering into the computer industry. Today, he is the CEO of EOS International, the world's most preferred library automation content and knowledge management solutions company. Though he holds this prestigious position, Mr. Saadat has not forgotten his roots and continues to apply its traditions to his life.*

*I like to start our interviews with background information, where were you born?*

I was born in Teheran in 1959.

*Is that where you received your education?*

I graduated from Azar high school in 1976 and then left to join my brother in London, England to pursue my college and University studies in Civil Engineering. After graduating from the University of Aston in Birmingham, I decided to move to Canada and obtain a Masters in Structural Engineering.

By the time I graduated, there was a bit of a recession in North America, especially in my field. I decided to join a software company in Vancouver. Much to my surprise I found myself enjoying the computer and technology and before I knew it I started working as a software engineer and that was about eighteen years ago. I began to write codes and over time I moved up to Research and Development as a Project Manager. From there I moved into Client Services and virtually I have built a Client Services department from the ground up. I am very much service oriented.

After this tour of duty I entered sales and marketing. In actuality I basically have experienced all different aspects of

this business within automation industry. All these experiences allowed me to move up to an executive position.

*When did you come to the United States?*

Two years ago and I have remained in southern California.

*You are married would you like to share your family with us?*

Actually the story of my marriage is romantic. In the summer of 1983 I returned to Iran just prior to graduating from the University of British Columbia. I had a crush on a young lady since childhood. Her name is Gita and our fathers were close friends. Seeing her again, I asked her to marry me. My dreams came true when she said yes. She returned to Canada with me. Presently she is an Operating Room nurse. This year we will be celebrating our 19<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

*That is wonderful! And children?*

Yes, we have one son, Ryan, who was born July 11<sup>th</sup>, 1992. His birth was a turning point in my life. We both enjoy being parents and being involved with his activities from education to soccer.

*Why did you come to the States?*



To work with EOS International.

***Can you tell us about EOS?***

Of course, it is in the business of providing library automation to special libraries. Our typical clients are Fortune 500 companies, law firms, medical institutions, governments and insurance companies.

***If I may interrupt, how did you wind up working for EOS?***

I believe that they were aware of my achievements in Canada. When they hired me I already had fifteen years of library experience and were in direct competition to the company I worked for. They invited me to California to discuss employment opportunities. Perhaps they felt that if you can't beat your competition, you should join them. It was their hopes that I would bring this company to global leadership within its industry.

One of the innovative ideas that I have brought to this company has allowed us to triple our revenue in the past couple of years. We are a service oriented company and work hard to insure our existing client base are happy. I believe they are because we use them as referrals and none as of yet have had anything negative to say. As I am sure you know word of mouth is the best marketing tool. We also have the idea of turning this company into ASP hosting solution.

***Do you have a product line?***

There are a couple of product lines that are available on our own server here as an ASP hosting solution to our clients. This has allowed the company to turn a corner.

***Getting back to your company as a computer layman, does your company act as a librarian?***

We have computer software solution, database management. Let me try to explain. There are huge organizations and companies who have their own libraries and their own record centers. In these libraries are books, research papers — all kinds of materials. In recent years, videos and CD's have been added. We refer to these types of libraries as "special libraries." They are run very differently than

public libraries. This business provides automation solution to these types of libraries globally. The concentration of our client base is in North America, but we do have offices in Europe and we also market our products throughout the globe by distributors. Our software allows the librarian and library staff to build a database of books and research papers and information for their patrons. They can access the latest information simply by searching the database. Now with the internet and all of the technology available to them, everyone from their desktops can access the information needed with ease. They can also request additional information by sending a request to the librarian for additional information.

***What makes your software so special that it acts more as a librarian that we may ask very vague questions and get direction? Are there any artificial intelligence principles?***

EOS library software solutions are designed from the clear direction of our client advisory group. All product features and functions are developed based on librarian needs and priorities and as such, librarian-specific logical work processes are already built-in.

The EOS products are extremely intuitive, allowing our clients to become productive in a very short period of time. For example, our sophisticated search technology uses adaptive pattern recognition, pattern searching, natural language searching, and fuzzy logic (automatically expand searches to include synonyms, common misspellings and to take context into account). Additionally search hits are color coded to indicate their importance, and links take users directly to the most relevant passages, thus making it even easier to find the right book or item quickly!

***How do you index the articles in the libraries? Do you rely on a central database or the libraries themselves to give you "keywords" that you use to search the results?***

Articles are indexed in the EOS Cataloging module. If a librarian wishes to add specific "keywords" or text to a record they can, but it is not necessary since EOS

search capabilities are quite comprehensive. Our software provides a number of ways to find items, in a single relational database or multiple databases, based on the client's individual goals. Some of the more sophisticated ways to find materials include natural language queries, relevancy rankings, word expansion, concept searching, platter recognition, proximity searching, wildcard ranges, as well as semantics and syntactic analysis.

***What is the key to your company's longevity?***

EOS has been helping to automate special libraries for over twenty years. The key to this success is our attention to our client's needs and desires, staying on the leading edge of technology and ALWAYS keeping our promises. We were the first to provide a special library solution and have won a number of awards for our technology, and remain the only Integrated Library System (ILS) vendor to have ever been nominated for the prestigious ComputerWorld Smithsonian Award Innovation.

***What is special about your management style or decision-making that allowed you to lead your company to such success?***

A thorough knowledge of both the industry and technology provided me with a clear vision for where library technology has been and where it is going. This knowledge base enables direct hands-on guidance to my valued employees and rapid decision-making on all-important projects. I also am a good listener and extremely focused in life. I believe that people may not remember exactly what you did, or what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel - I make my management, staff, and clients feel successful at their job.

***Will your system threaten actual libraries? Will this company have the same effect as E-Bay has had on the consumer industry?***

Not really, no, no. We are very different from those dot-com companies. Unlike most of those companies whose life is short, this company has been around for twenty years. I am a big believer that

in this world in which we live, with information at our fingertips, that libraries will not become extinct. Libraries are a necessity to our existence. Regardless of your economical level, people need to access information. It is vital to the existence of corporations and businesses all over the world. But the nature of those libraries has changed drastically. In the past, in a traditional form people use to go right to the front desk and face the librarian. Today with the help of technology and all of these innovative materials and software that exist, people need not physically walk up to the librarian. They communicate on line, so the nature of accessing information has changed but the actual concept of accessing information has not disappeared, and I don't believe that will go away for years to come.

***Is the company a storage company like Oracle or EMC who only deal with literature and libraries?***

Correct. In fact, we use Oracle and SQL as the back end to store information, but we ourselves do not provide storage. Our program is very customized for our industry and this is what makes us very unique in the library world, special library world basically.

***Have you done any work or do you have any clients that keep historical items or treasures particularly Iranians or Persians treasures?***

The Museum of Freemasonry in London. In fact, I visited them this past summer. They have a great deal of information stored on our database. There is also the Maryland Historical Society. I am not sure if they would have information on Iran, but they definitely have a lot of historical information stored in the database. So the answer to your question, yes, there are clients that use our system in order to retrieve a lot of archival information.

***Is the National Archive your customer?***

National Archive, I don't believe so, no, no.

***Do you have anything else to educate us about your system***

***and company?***

One of our educational tools is to offer seminars in major cities. The main purpose is not just to endorse our product, but to try to have the audience understand the importance of having access to information. I think this is important for them to know as well as the younger generation. Kids need to know how to access world information instantaneously. This is because of the rapid way the world is changing. If we do not educate our children on how to keep up with these changes or they will quickly fall behind. So when I am out there speaking to an audience I am promoting our product, technology and the importance of both. I also discuss the importance of libraries, library patrons and librarians to understand the tools they can use to access all information in an efficient manner.

***We're paving the path for the brighter future of Iranians in Corporate America. Therefore, we carry a big responsibility and Iranian executives must pay special attention to this by setting examples....***

Knowing how to use the system is as important as having the system. If you do not have a librarian who knows how to use it then the information within will never be used. Often systems of this sort are more difficult for a normal user like you and I. But with the help of a librarian, there is no limit to the amount of information available.

***Why do you think Iranians have a better time making it to the top of companies such as yours and other 'new technology' companies, but are not as represented in the rest of corporate America?***

I have always taken a personal interest in my client's successful use of products I have represented and taken personal

responsibility for their ongoing satisfaction. This commitment to my professional duties is what has carried me so far in my career. I strongly believe in the new generation of the Iranian community living abroad — a world of knowledge, talent and energy. However, as history has shown the first generation of immigrants normally face new challenges that would become easier for our children in the future (Europeans have faced similar problems when they first came to America). We're paving the path for the brighter future of Iranians in Corporate America. Therefore, we carry a big responsibility and Iranian executives must pay special attention to this by setting examples and show leadership in all aspects of life to make their community shine like stars.

***Last week I had the pleasure of interviewing a young man who will also be featured in the next issue who is half your age. During the interview he complained about the Iranian-American parent not putting enough emphasis on education, that education is a low priority. This statement shocked me because there are so many professionals, do you agree with his statement?***

You know what, I can only speak for myself, and my experience, with my parents and what I am doing with my own son. I am a big believer of education. One of the reasons I am where I am today is because of the importance my parents put on education. I remember how much effort they put into educating us, the sacrifices they made. If it wasn't for their support and encouragement, I would not be where I am today. Because of their dedication, I promised myself to pay it back through my children. We therefore have created an environment for our son where we constantly discuss education, culture and history and to provide him with everything he will need as he grows up. We want him to take advantage of every opportunity but to also understand and appreciate those who have made it possible. If we accomplish that I believe he will pass these same principals to his own children. As for other Iranian families, I don't think it is fair to say that this is a problem specific to our culture but a problem for every culture and household. In all cultures and societies there is always room for

improvement and always room to reevaluate our priorities. It is the responsibility of the parents to constantly reevaluate the situation. So, if as this young man feels it is a problem specific to the Iranian community, then I say it is a problem that can certainly be easily improved through constant discussion.

***I would like to pose another question to you regarding the American-Iranian community. It seems as if the Iranian community, as a young immigrant society, are more involved with individual problems rather than the problems that face the community in total. Hence, we haven't been able to get together the same way other ethnic groups and minorities have. Do you agree with this and how do we rectify this?***

I totally agree with you and it is a topic that is constantly discussed with my family and my friends. As first generation immigrants, the burden is on us. We are going to go through a lot of touchy times. It is a lot of responsibility and we will face challenges every day. I have a feeling that the next generation, our grandchildren, will have an easier time with growing up in America. But, my word of advice to our community and our society as an Iranian, is to pay close attention to their children. Parents must be a role model. I totally understand that there is much in this society that we need to follow. If we apply the same principals within our community, we as first generation immigrants can lead the second generation into an extremely successful life. Again it is our responsibility and we are the ones that will be held accountable for the future of this next generation. We can do much for them.

***In what way?***

As I mentioned there are a number of things we can do. One is to pay attention to their lives and their environment and acknowledge their concerns. When they come back from school it is our responsibility to be aware of their day by talking to them. We need to find out what they have learned, the things that are missed and why it is important to learn. In other words we must always communicate with our children especially in the fast paced society in which

we live. These days most parents are busy working and are exhausted after putting in long days. We have a tendency to become complacent about the level of conversations we have with our children. We need to remind ourselves of this. We also need to spend quality time with them on the weekends as much as possible. You have to have daily contact with them to instill our values upon them.

Because we are first generation Iranian-Americans it is so critical that we keep our values and value system that is what is really going to keep our society together. My son Ryan is only ten, but is fully aware of Iran before and after the revolution. He also participates in traditional events to get a better sense of his parents' heritage.

I don't have to tell you about richness of our culture from arts to values. It is a value system that has been passed on from generation to generation and it would be a shame if it ended by virtue of a new venue. Now that we are outside and living in much more challenging times it will take even more energy to maintain this value system. But it is an obligation we often forget.

***You are a great organizer as reflected in your success with this company. Do you have any advice for the younger generation on how to shape themselves up and in what way they can shape up this country and the world.***

In two words, discipline and focus. It is hard to find someone who is successful not to be disciplined or focused. You have to set goals and stay on course. That takes discipline and focus. Obviously, overall, there are many parameters involved in each life. But I personally believe that by having and believing in a certain set of principles and staying focused, you will achieve these goals. This is something we must constantly teach the younger generation, Iranian or not.

***Is there any subject that we have not touched on that you would like to speak about?***

No, but I would like to emphasize a point that you brought up earlier, because it is so important to me. As a first generation immigrant here, we have a responsibility. Our responsibility is towards society in general, maintaining our culture

within that society, understand the importance of family and responsibility, and most important that we set examples for those who are not part of the Persian community. This is something Iranians in and out of Iran must do. We have to try to be role models to others, to allow our society to be unique and looked up to. It is the culture and history behind being an Iranian that should be remembered. Because of the present situation in Iran, as well as, the past twenty some years this is more difficult. But, just because it is more difficult we cannot simply walk away from who we are. We must stand up to the challenge of making sure that the Iranians are not judged by the acts of a few.

I also hope that when we see that an Iranian has had a great accomplishment outside of Iran that we are proud to identify with them. By acknowledging rather than denying our heritage we can change any false images that now prevail. I feel that this is my responsibility and I hope that millions of other Iranians living outside Iran will consider it their responsibility too. This is my message to all the Iranians. We have so much talent and love to give and with that there is no reason for us not to succeed. If one can make it here so can we all!

***Inspiring words, thank you! Earlier you were talking about your late father.***

My father passed away when I was 13 years old. One thing I am certain of is that if he was alive today and at this interview he would greatly appreciate your knowledge and effort. Although we only had a short time together in that short period of time I learned so much from him. In fact most of my thoughts and opinions shared with you today are a reflection of him. I have followed in his footsteps. So, he would have been thrilled to know that today we are talking about Persian heritage and how individuals in this society can contribute to it. This magazine, *Persian Heritage*, is an extremely important tool for the Iranian community here as well as abroad. I am impressed with its quality in appearance and articles. I only hope that is being read by large numbers of Iranian families.

I would like to say one more thing. Iranians living outside Iran must learn to have tolerance. In this country you have the freedom to speak out against people, policies, etc. That is the beauty of freedom of speech. I'm hoping that the future Iran will once again have those qualities. ■