

Persian Heritage

Vol. 6, No. 22

Summer 2001



Interview with Ms. Sciolino – p. 29



Interview with D. de Warren – p. 37



Meet Cyrus Mehri – p. 47



Shafa In His Own Words – p. 51

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK 6

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR 8

NEWS BRIEFS 11

COMMENTARY 15

“CIA & Iran” (By: *Frederick F. Arzideh*) 15

More on “CIA & Iran” (By: *David A. Yazdan*) 15

“The Odyssey of A Fallen City” (By: *David A. Yazdan*) 17

In Neshapur — Poem (By: *David A. Yeagley*) 17

THE ARTS

Infinite Love — Poem (By: *F. A. Sadeghpour*) 18

Foreign Shores (By: *Paymon Mohtashemi*) 19

Hafez — Poem (Translated by: *Mahmood Karimi-Hakak*) 19

Interview with **Mahmood Karimi-Hakak** 21

YOUR PERSIAN HERITAGE

A Love Song — Poem (By: *Mahmood Karimi-Hakak*) 34

Historial Vignette: **Fraydoon** 36

By: *David A. Yazdan*

Interview with **David de Warren: Artistic Director of the world Premier of *Zal and Rudabeh*** 37

By: *Shahin Monshipour*

The Mongol Invasion — Part I 40

By: *David A. Yazdan*

The Relationship Between the Persian and Roman Empires 44

By: *F. A. Sadeghpour*

Meet **Cyrus Mehri** 47

By: *Shahrokh Ahkami*

Shojaeddin Shafa In His Own Words (Part III) 51

FEATURE

INTERVIEW WITH ELAINE SCIOLINO 29

By: *Shahrokh Ahkami*

OUTSIDE YOUR HERITAGE

Review: The Circle 57

THEATRE REVIEWS 58

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

All of us at one time or another have been confronted with situations where two problems need to be resolved simultaneously. Such was my case as I prepared to choose a cover story for this issue. I definitively wanted a young Iranian American on the cover. Certainly there are many of them. This individual, however, would also have to be inspirational, intelligent, hardworking and sensitive — in other words, exhibit good leadership qualities. I found Cyrus Mehri to be such a person, thus both of my problems were solved at least for the cover story of this edition. I then realized that the dilemma I faced had a larger venue. We Iranians as a group have not been able to simultaneously solve two problems at one time, especially when it comes to leadership. We have many leaders, but are unsuccessful in having leadership that can unite us as a group and become the powerful and influential community we deserve, and at the same time be compassionate and sensitive enough to help all Iranians in less fortunate positions.

This weak link in our community was on my mind all the way to San Diego where I was to spend Noe Rouz. I was not happy having to spend my holiday away from home, but circumstances dictated that I celebrate this great holiday with friends and family in California. Much to my surprise this trip proved to be a very enlightening experience. For many years I have had the pleasure of knowing Mrs. Estakhry. Although we live on opposite sides of this country and take different positions on a variety of topics, we share one common goal and emotion. We both live far from our birth land and have a deep love for Iranians, Iran and our culture. My affection for Iran and Iranians is reflected in *Persian Heritage* and Mrs. Estakhry's as the leader of the Persian Cultural Center of San Diego. Because of her dedication and devotion over the past thirteen years at the Center, hundreds of Persian Americans have learned the Persian language, about their culture and the contributions Persians have made to the world. Because of her, hundreds of Persians are proud to call themselves Iranians.

The party I attended in celebration of Noe Rouz was organized by the Persian Cultural Center of San Diego under the direction of Mrs. Estakhry. Two events occurred that evening that pleasantly shocked me and again reflected the true leadership qualities of this beautiful woman. It was on this evening that Mrs. Estakhry passed the gavel, the crown of her position at the Center, on to a younger generation, yet sincerely pledged her continued allegiance to the organization. Though she would no longer wear the crown, she would still be willing to work hard for the organization despite the fact that the glory of the success would go to another. I was deeply touched by her action, as were all the guests. After she passed the gavel Ms. Estakhry again shocked me. She began to auction off two Noe Rouz vegetable arrangements. She created a bidding frenzy with these arrangements that resulted in raising \$3,600.00 for the organization. What talent I thought!

I then drifted back to my thought on the airplane, leadership in the Iranian community. We do have good leadership. Mrs. Estakhry is one example. She passed her crown with such dignity. She recognized the right moment when to allow the next generation to take charge. She, and other's like her, unfortunately are in the minority. All too often our leaders continue to hold onto a crown, long after their term and long after their productivity has diminished. Why do so many of us fail to understand that these are not eternal crowns bestowed upon us. They should not be crowns of prestige but rather reflect the toils of our success. When this success becomes stagnant we must have the courage and good wisdom to remove the crown and pass it forward.

Following the event I was engaged in a conversation with a few gentlemen who, like me, were displaced from their homes for Noe Rouz. Their conversations reflected my thoughts. One was discussing his membership with a Persian organization. For years, he told me, his organization and another in the next town over would hold joint NoRouz parties which proved to be very successful. He continued by telling me that for no apparent reason this year the leader of the other organization decided to hold their own event on the same night as this gentleman's organization. Because of the splitting



Persian Heritage

www.mirassiran.com

Persian Heritage, Inc.

110 Passaic Avenue
Passaic, NJ 07055

E-mail: ahkami@mirassiran.com

Telephone: (973) 471-4283

Fax: (973) 471-8534

or: (973) 574-8995

EDITOR:

SHAHROKH AHKAMI

EDITORIAL BOARD: Dr. Mehdi Abu-Saidi, Ehrin Ahkami Raiszadeh, Dr. Mahvash Ajavi Naini, Mohammad Bagher Ajavi, Roxane Azimi, Dr. Talat Bassari, Mohammad Ali Dowlatabadi, Mehdi Ebrahimi, Mohammad H. Hakami, Ardashir Lotfaliani, Shahin Monshipour, K. B. Navi, Dr. Khosro Pakbaz, Dr. Hooshang Rahmani, Dr. Kamshad Raiszadeh, Farhang A. Sadeghpour, Mohammad K. Sadigh, Ghanraem Sulaymonpur, Dr. David Yeagley.

MANAGING EDITOR:

HALEH RA

ADVERTISING:

LAURA HOLT AND TERRY RUSSO

The contents of the articles and advertisements in this journal, with the exception of the editorial, are the sole works of each individual writers and contributors. This magazine does not have any confirmed knowledge as to the truth and veracity of these articles, all contributors agree to hold harmless and indemnify Persian Heritage (Mirassiran), Persian Heritage Inc., its editors, staff, board of directors, and all those individuals directly associated with the publishing of this magazine. The opinions expressed in these articles are the sole opinions of the writers and not the journal. No article or picture submitted will be returned to the writer or contributor. All articles submitted in English must be typed.

The appearance of advertising in this magazine does not constitute a guarantee or endorsement of the products by *Persian Heritage*. In addition, articles and letters published do not reflect the views of this publication.

All requests for permissions and reprints must be made in writing to the managing editor.

PUBLISHED BY:

PERSIAN HERITAGE, INC.

A corporation organized for cultural and literary purposes

Cover Price: \$4.00

Subscriptions: \$18.00 per year (domestic),
\$28.00 per year (foreign)

Typesetting & layout: FARABI PUBLISHERS

of family and friends the attendance at his event diminished and significantly harmed the organization.

Joining in the conversation was a gentleman who was annoyed at an organization he had contributed for the development of a mosque. There was enough money to purchase a building. For a short time was used as a house of prayer, memorials and a cultural center for music and poetry. The success was short lived because of animosity growing between leadership. Rather than calling for new leadership, their differences resulted in the closing of the doors of the building, leaving its contingency abandoned.

The final conversation was the discontentment of an individual who had made a significant investment in the development of a cultural center in his state. He explained that the money was given some time ago, but to date there is still no center or an explanation of the whereabouts of the investments.

My heart became heavy after hearing these complaints and again revived the confusion and disappointment I have with our leadership. But, I then remembered Mrs. Estakhry, Cyrus Mehri and a few others. We can have great leadership if we try. We can have great leadership if we get caught up more in the goals of the organization and not the crown it brings.

* * *

Have you ever thought that you are the missing link of Darwin? Over the past few months, following my spring 2001 editorial, some of my readers have convinced me that I am a missing link. They have accused me of entering into the political arena, writing against or for the Iranian government. In this editorial, I would like to address one of these attacks. This time it is by the "Shah worshiper" (Shah Parast) and not a Shah lover (Shah Doust) and supporters of a Constitutional Monarchy. These attacks made me question whether or not I am attached to any of these groups or organizations. I am confused because both the supporters of the Islamic Republic and the Shah worshippers like and dislike the articles within *Persian Heritage*.

Again, I turn to my readers in the hopes that they will help me find an identity and a place for the missing link that I am. Maybe I shouldn't impose my personal problems on you, but I do have a reason for this. I believe that my problems

may reflect the problems of my kind and caring readers. By openly discussing these problems with them, perhaps we can find answers that will help us soothe our agony and pain.

On this particular day my mind was preoccupied with one of my patients. My thoughts were interrupted by the visit of a very dear friend, who unfortunately received a very small piece of my attention. Though I spent some time with him, the thought that plagued my mind was that I hoped he would soon leave. Finally, our work hours ended and I left the office to go to New York to visit a friend who was leaving for Iran in a few days (as always, I try to find someone going to Iran, and beg them to bring *Persian Heritage* magazines).

As I neared the Lincoln Tunnel, I got stuck in heavy traffic. While immersed in my thoughts, the telephone rang. It was another longtime family friend. She called to ask if I was going to be attending the party for Prince Reza Pahlavi in New York. Normally, I often tease and cajole with her (my late father always advised me that often teasing between friends can often cause great misunderstanding. I never listened to his valuable lesson). I asked her what the party was for and she explained that it was a fund-raising for a charity affair. I responded that I had not yet received an invitation for *Persian Heritage* to cover the event and that the date conflicted with another engagement. She replied by saying that regardless of whether or not I attended, this was a charity and that I had to donate. Exhausted, I was angered by his demand. I was also frustrated because I was close to the Lincoln Tunnel entrance and feared my explanation to her would be interrupted.

In the few minutes I had, I told her that if Prince Reza Pahlavi donates a small portion of his money, then there would be no need for your or my help. Suddenly, this longtime friend (who I am sure was not alone) answered me by stating "If instead of Prince Reza Pahlavi some bearded guys ... came to you, you would have had your check ready! This response deeply surprised and saddened me. After a pause, I could only say good-bye.

I continued on to my friends apartment. My mood must have been obvious because they immediately asked me what was wrong, when they opened the door. I explained what happened and how I was in shock over this persons reaction to my statement and decline to donate. How

could she so easily allow herself to accuse me of something that she had no basis of knowing. I asked my host and their guests why Iranians are so quick to point a finger, accuse and label without knowing all the facts. My friends replied by saying that it is unfortunate, but most Iranians do not like discussions or differences of opinions. A difference of opinion too often is translated into a much bigger issue. He continued by saying that we all consider ourselves experts in every subject and knowledgeable about the rest. We force our opinions down the listeners throat and if they do not accept it consider them an enemy. We Iranians have a habit of picking a little stone in the sand and from it make a big statue. We cherish it and adore it. When we get tired of it, however, we begin to hate it and blame it for any problems that have found their way to our doorstep, and then we destroy it with our own hands. This discussion on this continued for the rest of my visit.

As I drove home, I wondered if Prince Reza-Pahlavi (or Reza Pahlavi), who hopes someday to lead Iran, is aware that some of his followers will forcefully impose their opinions on others and fight with anyone who disagrees with him. If he is aware of this and does nothing to stop these actions, I feel sorry for the Iranian nation should he become their leader. Why is it that each time Iran finds it way out of a pothole, it falls inside a deeper crater?!!

Shahrokh Alavi

DON'T FORGET YOUR

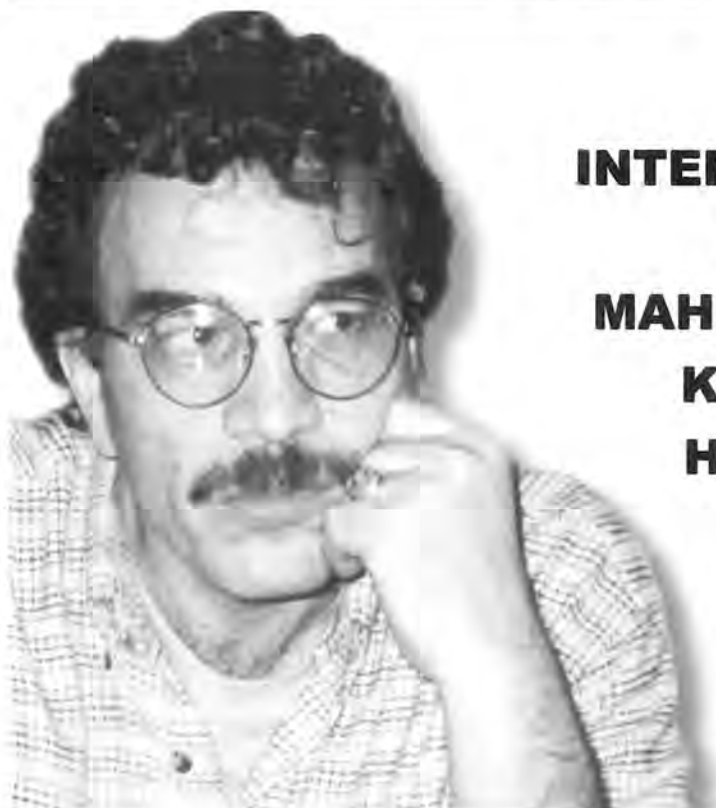
Persian
Heritage

SUBSCRIBE NOW!

(973) 471-4283

www.persian-heritage.com

AN INTERVIEW WITH MAHMOOD KARIMI HAKAK



Mahmood Karimi-Hakak was born in Mashad, Iran and is proud to be a Mashadi. After spending a few hours with him it is clear that he stands true to his convictions. Consequences arising from these convictions are second to the cause. He does not seek notoriety. He does not look for acceptance, nor does he look for rewards from and for his actions. He seeks only fairness and the right to create.

PH: *We thank you for your time. Persian Heritage selected you initially because of your talent as a director. After reading about you and the events circling your life, I believe that you have multiple messages for our readers. Some of them may not agree with your positions and the magazine does not take a position nor do we discount or agree with your positions. The actions you have taken with regard to events in your life yield a lesson for the reader. It is the reader who will ultimately choose or accept your position. On that note I would like to begin. Where did you receive most of your schooling?*

MKH: Elementary and high school in Mashad. I received my high school diploma in Tehran and after serving four years in the Air Force, I entered University of Tehran's School of Fine Arts. Sometime in 1971-72, I became discontent with the education I was receiving at the University so I decided to come to America. As a student in Iran I taught "Persian as a Second Language" to foreigners at The Academy of Language in Tehran. Later I became the director of the Academy and edited and wrote nine textbooks on teaching Persian as a Second Language. I started with *Hello, How are you?* and ended with *A Glance at Modern Persian Literature*. As a teacher of an advanced course in Persian I discussed with my students the resistance and the uprising of the intellectuals against the Shah's regime. These discussions caused me to be pulled into the Savak almost every other day. Some saw this as a draw-

back. I saw it as an opportunity to get more insight on what was going on. I was fortunate because most of the students in that specific class were members of the American, Russian, Chinese and Japanese embassies. Whenever I was taken to SAVAK they would make a call and the next day I was back in my class.

PH: *If things were so dangerous why didn't you leave?*

MKH: Edward Albee, one of the foremost American playwrights, says in *The Zoo Story*, "Sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly." This has been, in a way, the story of my life. You know, I did not view that as dangerous. I needed to learn a lot about the situation in my country. Plus there was a small problem! I was not supposed to leave the country. They would not give me a passport. One day, however, a man from the Passport Office visited the Academy and asked me to write a Persian lesson on what the foreigners, entering the country, should know about the passport office. I made a deal with him. If he could obtain a passport for me, I in return would write in a lesson and teach it to my incoming students. I guess my being Mashadi helped me! Two or three months later he told me I could get a passport, but I only had two weeks to leave the country.

PH: *How were you able to make such quick arrangements?*

MKH: Again I had a stroke of luck. A student of mine was a professor at a small college in mid-western United States. It is called Tarkio College, located where the states of Missouri, Iowa and Nebraska meet. That day when I came to class and told the students about this opportunity he made a phone call to Tarkio College and I was issued an I-20 form within one week. I was America bound. I finished my undergraduate degree there and then received my graduate degrees from Rutgers University's Mason Gross School of the Arts and The Graduate School of Education.

Since then I have been teaching and directing here, in Europe and recently in Iran. I have directed over 30 productions. I have also written and designed many of these pieces. Half of these productions were based on Iranian poetry, myth and/or stories. Among them, a 1979 produc-

tion called **Passion of Ashura**, the first *Ta'zieh* in the US. Three productions on Forough's poetry, whom I love, two on Samad Behrangie's writings and three on Molavi's poems. During 1989-93 when I served as the head of the directing program at Towson University in Maryland, I directed Shakespeare's **A Midsummer Night's Dream**, and **Gilgamesh Con/Quest**, the first theatrical staging of the **Epic of Gilgamesh**. The was attended by the representatives of The American Festival Theatre, who invited me to prepare a production for the 1991 International Theatre Festival of Edinburgh in Scotland. I created **Seven Stages** based on the collage of poems by Forough and Molavi. This was a kind of a dialogue between these two poets and its influence on a company of six actors who also contributed to the writing of the text.

PH: *Before discussing your theatrical career I would like to discuss some rather interesting events in your life. You returned to Iran in 1993. What made you return?*

MKH: I think the more appropriate question is what made me stay when I returned. I returned in 1992 to visit my mother for ten days. I was on my way to Latvia where I was asked to conduct a directing workshop. When I opened the door to her apartment I saw a small woman with all white hair. She had aged so much, I knew I could not leave her. I canceled my trip to Latvia and remained in Iran for the entire summer of 1992. During that time I was asked by some of my ex-professors to speak to the university students. At one of these lectures, I was scolding the students for being lazy in comparison to the students in the States. A young woman spoke. What she said cemented my decision to return to Iran. This brave young woman stood up and said "You are here bragging about what you knew and we do not. What you do not realize is that it was your generation that created this revolution. I was just a small child at that time. As soon as your generation realized that this was not what they had expected, they left leaving my generation to deal with the aftermath of what they started. We did not ask for this, nor did we have the means to leave like they did. For all these years not a single worthwhile book has been published. Our progressive artists and intellectuals, those who could not leave are

either dead, or in jail, or as Forough said 'Swamps of alcohol ... dragged down to its depths'. We are being taught by those who, in most cases, are chosen not because of their knowledge in the field but because of their loyalty to a certain ideology, or so they pretend. People who hardly know much about anything. I cannot believe that you have the nerve to come here and chastise us, and then of course you will leave too." Her words pierced my heart. I sat down and cried. She started crying for making me upset. It was really a depressing scene. I then made a promise to her and that I would return, but first I had some responsibilities to finish in the States. I returned in 1993.

PH: *When you returned what did you do?*

MKH: I am a teacher so I began teaching small groups of students, then taught at the university voluntarily, graduates and undergraduates, for a while until I was hired at Sooreh School for the Arts to teach full time. I also made a film. I petitioned the authorities to do theater productions, but always faced a wall of silence until 1999, after Mr. Khatami won the election. Eventually, The Center for the Performing Arts, the official establishment in charge of theatrical activities in Iran, allowed me to direct. We then agreed on a production. It was Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The head of this office believed it would survive the scrutiny of the censor. Interestingly enough, the play did not survive the scrutiny of the censor. It closed after the fourth performance.

PH: *Why?*

MKH: Some believe the problem was with the translation, some say it was the production and others said that it was the theater group, or me. This was the first time this play was staged in Iran. The translation was the first of Shakespeare's plays mostly in Persian verse and there were many parallels with the time and place. The group consisted of about 40 men and women with all but one under the age of thirty (and for many this was their first time on stage), and I was unaware of the budgetary and other 'under the table' dealings.

PH: *As you were translating did you see the parallel?*

MKH: I must say that I was shocked to realize that Shakespeare knew about present day Iran.

PH: *So it seems that from day one the production was doomed?*

MKH: Yes, we all stuck together as a group with one goal, to get this play on the despite many difficulties. Though there was a rumor that I finally had approval, the truth is that we were not given a contract, but rather a verbal 'Go Ahead' by the authorities. The budget with which we were to prepare the production kept changing drastically, from 43 million Toman approved in our Summer 1998 Production Meeting, to 30, to 19, to 15, and finally to 12, from which we only received 3, and that was after the show opened and we had spent almost seven million Tomans. We had to legitimize our rehearsals, so we informed the public to avoid the consequences of the unauthorized gatherings of men and women. I was then asked to appear on a few TV talk shows speaking about theatre. I insisted that I would only appear if it were live.

PH: *Why?*

MKH: I did not want my words edited. The first forty-five minutes was dedicated to another guest who wasn't even scheduled to appear, but had just received a prize for his first. In the remaining time the host asked questions of the gentleman on my left. I was in the middle. Near the end, he apologized for having no time left to speak to me but asked me to say a few words about my recent project. I thanked and continued to speak for fifteen minutes about the project, censorship, the lack of adequate education, books, libraries, possibilities which hinder the flourishing of the young. That night I received over one hundred phone calls from young people all over the country thanking me for speaking. I had hoped that the young woman, who made me return to Iran, would call. Two days later we were assigned a performance space, the basement of the Freedom Museum. It contained no theatrical lighting, adequate acoustics and sound equipment, but as the saying goes, *kachi beh az hich chi*. We graciously accepted the space. We were not allowed into the space until 10 days prior to our opening. I must say how impressed I was with this group. I have never seen, in twenty years

of directing, a group more dedicated to a production than this. THANK YOU MY FRIENDS. The space could only sit 350 to 400 people. The first performance was on January 20, 1998, during the Fajer Theatre Festival. Our lighting consisted of me holding a lighting projector on my shoulder. The play received the 1999 Critics' Award.

PH: Did people buy tickets?

MKH: Yes, it was packed every night. Many obstacles existed during the festival, which we overcame. Two days prior to our post festival opening performance we were told that the time scheduled was changed due to a musical concert, then the arrangement was changed. We were to postpone our performances until after the closing of the music festival some four weeks later. We fought every step of the way but got the space one day before our performances were to begin. Friday February 19, I invited my colleagues, critics and theatre artists to attend a preview because I had a feeling that this play would not be allowed its scheduled run. Observers came in and the play was approved once again. After the performance that night, I asked the audience, some six hundred people, to stay and discuss the performance. Most remained. During the two hours discussion, which was video taped, we heard nothing but praise. Following the meeting, the head of the security guard at the museum, called The Colonel, demanded the tape, but he never received it. The official "Opening Night" was Saturday the 21st of February. The account of what happened in the next two days is beyond the scope of this interview.

On the second night people were lined up outside of the theatre. They could not get in. They said the bookstores and other official places that sell theatre tickets had no tickets and were told the show was canceled. I asked why the box office was not selling tickets. I was told that the box office manager had accidentally locked his keys in the office and could not get in. Since it was government property no one could pry the lock. One of my production managers, while apologizing for his action, announced that he had taken some tickets to distribute but being busy had forgotten to return them. He had four hundred tickets in his possession. I scolded him openly for doing that and then suggested we sell these tickets to people. We

had a packed house that night.

The following day, a large crowd was outside the theatre. When I entered the theater, I saw the official from the censor's office who had already "observed" the play seven times. He refused to let the crowd in. He said somebody had complained that this production contained pornography and as a result, the show would have to be reevaluated. I told him that he had already seen it seven times and over 2,500 other people have attended the previous performances and to date no one has complained, and that no changes had been made to the play. He apologized but stressed his position. No one was allowed into the theater and he told me to lie to the audience that the play had been canceled because of technical difficulties. I asked him to go out to the audience with me because I could not lie. He stated the reason to the audience. They unanimously responded by saying, "If the director says that the play has technical problems, we'll leave", otherwise they expected to see a performance. He then turned to me and ordered me to tell them that. I responded by saying "You know under the Islamic code of conduct, I could not lie." The audience heard this and cheered. That night we performed for this gentleman, another official from the Office of Observation, a few officers of the Revolutionary Guard, and a high ranking clergyman who was gracious enough to accept my request and attend that performance on very short notice. Nothing objectionable was observed in the production and we were again issued permission to continue with the performances.

February 24 was to be our last performance. As I entered the theater that night, friends of the performance were warning me to be careful. I did not understand what they were talking about, but as the audience entered, I understood. Among them I saw some individuals who were capable of causing a scene that could result in violence. Immediately, I alerted the actors. The lighting crew was directed to take off the glass window between the house and the booth. I wanted them to listen for any unusual noise in the house and told them to bring up the house lights if hear something unusual, so that the audience could see what was coming. I then asked the two leaders of this group to come outside. I wanted to keep things light hearted so I tried to make a joke. I asked them if they were there to hurt

anyone. They said no. I returned by saying that I knew they were not happy with the production so what was their agenda? One explained that he believed I had lost my direction in life. Trying to guide me to the right path he asked who did I believe this country belonged to. I responded by saying Iran belongs to all its citizens. He did try to correct me, but I could not imagine one owner for such a vast country and all its diverse people.

PH: I trust the performance did not go on without a glitch.

MKH: No, it ended in the beginning of Act II, Scene II, where Shakespeare speaks to our situation once again. The lines on which the performance was stopped were "You spotted snakes with double tongue, thorny hedgehogs, be not seen...Newts and blind worms, do no wrong" and "Waving spiders, come not hear...Beetles black, approach not near". The people that I had suspected to cause a problem began to shout out some very impolite words. In a few minutes it became a verbal "free for all." Jumping onto the stage before tempers flared into physical violence, I reminded everyone that we live in a time of a president who believes in dialogue, and theatre is the place for dialogue. "Every person has the right to like or dislike a production", I claimed "Since this stage is, for us all, a learning environment", thus I requested "Why not invite all on stage and hear what it is that they dislike about this." The audience cheered but the objectors disagreed. Once again, the fate of this play was to be discussed behind closed doors. For two hours and ten minutes the audience sat quietly. Of course, after this event I knew there was no way the show would go on, I just wanted it to end without any incident.

PH: And what then happened to you?

MKH: I was prosecuted.

PH: You did not go to jail?

MKH: No, I was given a choice of punishment. Then it was suggested that I leave the country.

PH: Your love for the theater runs equal to your hatred for censorship. During these events what was running stronger? If

the play by critics standards was not good, but you still believed in the production, would you have fought so hard to keep it going?

MKH: That is a very simple question to answer. Honestly the production didn't really matter. Don't get me wrong. I love the theater deeply and have devoted my whole life to it. What was far more important, though, was to stand up for what we believed. Again go back to that young woman who questioned me. I needed to respond and commit to her, even though I personally had nothing to do with what she claimed destroyed her life. In fact I was in America at the time. My generation, however, did have something to do with it, but left when things did not turn out as they expected. Those who could not leave, or refused to leave, faced extreme hardships. Some others left behind a group of youth to fight the battle they had lost. Let me use this example: I may have a very hard life and I may decide to do away with my life. That is my right. That, however, does not justify my action to my three-year-old daughters? The fact that this generation was brought into issues created by my generation does not make them responsible for making the change without our help. It is this sense of responsibility that drives me. I feel responsible, as an individual, an educator and an artist, to a group of people who have no where else to turn.

PH: Many of those who remained compromised their positions, had you been unable to leave would you and your beliefs had been compromised?

MKH: I don't know what I would have done then. It is one's actions that speak, and I was not in that situation. One thing I do know is that we /I cannot deny my generation's participation in the events that led into today. I am in no place to judge anybody else and I don't mean to do that. I am sure that some of my colleagues would have preferred to leave had they been in my situation, some would have compromised themselves, and some would do exactly the same. We do have to accept some responsibility, however, for what has happened to our society and for not keeping the promise made to this younger generation. My generation made

a promise to those ten-year-old children and their parents and know they need to see some action. It is not enough to just discuss their fates and issue advice from the comfort and safety of our house in this side of the border.

PH: The magazine is in constant receipt of correspondence telling our editor to take a stronger stand against or for the government in place. Of course we are not a political magazine and we take no sides. Despite my opinion of the present or past government, I am often angered by the rhetoric made from a safe distance. Is that pretty much the consensus of the younger Iranian generation on their feelings of their Iranian-American counterparts in this country and do they accept being dictated to?

MKH: No, I do not really think this is the consensus of the younger generation. I think the younger generation is a lot more forgiving than this. I was kind of pushed out of the country by my students. I think one thing that we should do is to stop expecting *them* to create the change so *we* could then go and rule them. If we are really interested in changes in our country, we should return, at least for a time, and take an active part in that change. If we can't return, we could actively participate in building a supporting network for those who are trying to create this change inside the country. There are of course other steps that we could take. Translate educational books and send them there, or even pay for its publication if we can. Those of us who teach, can take off a summer or two, go back and give free lectures and seminars to these young people who are so eager to learn. I believe we have never had such a generation as thirsty for knowledge as we do now.

PH: Let's discuss censorship...

MKH: As I mentioned in my December 1 lecture on Censorship at The University Center of CUNY, I believe there are two kinds of censorship: the *veiled* and the *transparent*. The *transparent* censorship is the kind you see in America. Take Mayor Guiliani, the Brooklyn Museum and the painting of the Madonna with fe-

ces all over her. It was condemned by the mayor who threatened to close the show and withhold public funds from the museum. This is *transparent* censorship because we know where it came from, who was behind it and the reasons for it. In the case of *veiled* censorship you never know where the order comes from, who is behind it and why. This is actually the kind of censorship practiced in Iran. You see, you can deal with censorship as long as you know the 'where's and 'why's of it.

PH: Getting back to Iran for a minute. Would you agree that if the younger generation revolted in mass, as in 1979, that it could mean the demise of the country. A weakening inside could certainly result in the physical division of Iran.

MKH: I don't think another uprising of the kind we experienced in 1979 is the way out for the situation we have in Iran today. I believe this kind of overnight revolution has never worked. True revolution means true change, and true change does not happen overnight. It takes time. Earlier I mentioned that my observation tells me that we have the most thirsty-for-knowledge generation in my country today. Let me add that I also believe that our countrymen and countrywomen have never been so politically aware as they are today. No I am not a historian but as Samad Behrangi says in *Little Black Fish*, "I just say what my eyes see." Today's younger generation of Iranians know that the road to prosperity and democracy is an uphill climb, a destination that cannot be reached unless every step is taken firmly and carefully. I see this understanding every time I ride a cab, go to the grocery store or speak with my actors, students, and other young friends. This political consciousness is the very least we owe to the last 20 years of our history.

PH: So complacency has been erased from their lives, unlike here in the US where there is obvious complacency as far as educating ourselves on foreign politics?

MKH: Yes. I do believe in the United States we need to become less complacent about global politics. If I may regress for a moment, those young men who closed my show had as much right to ob-

ject to our play as we did to perform it. They also bare an Iranian birth certificate, so that is as much their country as it is ours. I am not saying that their action was justified or unjustified. I am stressing the need to understand each other through dialogue. I have said this many times in Iran as well. We must promote dialogue. We must accept differences. The most important thing to do is not to neutralize censorship, or even try to avoid it. What is important is to create and push for dialogue with the officers of the censor. This is what I have tried to teach my students in Iran, and try to do here. Unfortunately in Iran, and among many Iranians elsewhere, the tradition of dialogue does not exist, thus this wonderful manner of exchanging minds is rarely practiced. Remember, it is the dialogue and not rhetoric that then brings about a trust, an understanding and hopefully a change. At this beginning of the new millennium, we are not in an age of fighting, but of exchanging meaningful words. Thankfully, dialogue is starting in Iran and it is working. There are things said in Iran today that would have been censored ten, twenty or thirty years ago. People are beginning to understand both the secular and non-secular positions and how each one impacts their lives. In some ways the real revolution is happening now. Let's hope that this one will continue in a positive and productive manner.

PH: *How did you become interested in theatre?*

MKH: My interest in theatre started when I was hardly thirteen years old. One of my teachers thought I had a loud and clear speaking voice. That was enough to cast me in a play. I remember at that specific performance, my father, God bless his soul, was sitting in the front row. My teacher went and asked him to go sit in back. He was afraid that if I saw my father I might feel intimidated and not be able to continue my role. My father replied "If my son is going on stage to act, he better be able to look me in the eye and deliver his line." I remember I did look for him and tried to speak directly to him. It was an opportunity to yell at him without being punished for it, I suppose. When I got accepted to the University of Teheran's School of Fine Arts' theater program, I was practically the only member of my family who rejoiced. Later I decided to leave Iran because I wanted more than what I was

getting out of that program. I came to the States to study with those masters whose methods I could only read about then.

PH: *Do you remember the first play you directed?*

MKH: The first full-length play I directed was Camus' *Caligula*. For directing that play I was awarded a Levin Scholarship to Rutgers University. I tried to mirror the racial/cultural struggle that I had observed in the city of New Brunswick through the inner struggle of *Caligula*. It was an experiment in cultural exploration for me that has remained the stamp of my directing in every play I have since written and/or directed. I think every theatre piece, regardless of the time it was written should be "contemporaneous" in relation to its audience and their socio/political cultural environment. To do otherwise is reconstructing history, and that I am not interested in.

PH: *So you do not do traditional Shakespeare?*

MKH: Yes, I do. I do traditional Shakespeare as I believe Shakespeare would do if he were to do his play today and here.

PH: *You have moved from Shakespeare to Rumi, why?*

MKH: Peter Brook, the renowned director says that the theatre after Becket and Brecht needs to "find a way into the future: a return to Shakespeare". Shakespeare is a modern playwright. Shakespeare is our contemporary. I think of Rumi as a post-modern poet. This may be why he is so popular now. This may be why the people of the 21st century have just discovered Rumi.

PH: *Do you do modern pieces also?*

MKH: Whatever I do is modern. I sometimes just use texts that may not have been written during the era that we call modern. But if you mean plays that are written by the playwrights labeled as modern, yes. I have done modern plays such as Albee, Williams, Brecht, Becket, Shepherd, Fugard and so on.

PH: *Do you think live theater is a dying media in the US?*

MKH: Not at all! Theatre commercially has had a difficult time, but as an art, it has never even gotten close to dying. I tend to judge the success of an art by its artistic value and not only by box office returns. VanGogh died poor but we consider him a great artist. Shakespeare was far from being well off and had many problems with censorship, but he is the greatest playwright who ever lived.

PH: *Recently I read that evidence has been discovered that Shakespeare based his writing on Persian writers?*

MH: Shakespeare, like many other great artists borrowed his ideas from every place and culture including Persia, but that does not diminish his genius. Many great writers and artists, and even religious teachers borrowed from Persia. Didn't I just read, in your own publication that Christianity and Judaism borrowed their material from Zarathustra? Don't they say that Buddha was a Persian prince? But what does that matter? I try to shy away from statements that consider all things good having their origin in Persia, even though I may believe such statements in my heart. What I think is important is what are we doing with this great civilization? How we, as Persians today, contribute to such an unquestionably overwhelming wealth of culture, knowledge and art?

PH: *As a director one of the terms used in a review is the seamlessness of the performance. Can you explain this term?*

MKH: No, because I never really understood what that meant. I think a good theatre piece presents a consistent flow of images from start to finish. Is this what you mean by seamlessness? A play, like a poem, like a dance, like a painting, like any piece of art, like fresh pouring rain, like beautiful falling snow is a succession, a stream of meaningful and imaginative action. In my plays I try to present a chain of movements that if you pull one out, the whole thing should fall apart. Maybe that is why I like to view my theatre work as a cultural exploration. Culture, I like to think, is a series of events remembered and practiced by a people.

PH: *As a director how do you create movement on the stage?*

MKH: I look at every play as a dance piece. A dance that may last one moment, one day or one century. This dance may be a physical movement, a vocal outburst, an emotional expression, or any combination of these and/or a million other explorations, by one or more characters, that begins at one end and ends at the other end of a presentation. Every image, if I could call it that, is based on the previous image and is the basis for the next one. Often, the first day of rehearsal I walk in with an image in my head, an idea about what I want to see on the stage, a thought about what I want to communicate through this piece, a concept. What is created through the rehearsal process greatly depends upon the actors and other creative artists with whom I collaborate.

PH: *How many times do you read a play prior to working on it?*

MKH: I like to think a million times, but that is not true. I definitely read the play more than once. I try to become well familiar with the play, or at least the message I would like to convey through it. But, I usually ask that my potential cast not read the play until we have had at least two rehearsals. I have never cast a show the first day or at the auditions. Casting normally happens one or two weeks after rehearsals have started. I believe every character on stage is a child born out of a love relationship between the person of the actor and the character written in the script. Therefore I need for these two to become acquainted, fall in love and mate.

PH: *Why did you chose stage directing rather than film directing?*

MKH: I don't really know. I think it was partly fate and partly because I like the challenge of live performance. I have done a couple of films, producing, coaching the director and the actors, even directing a couple of short ones myself, but I have yet to direct a full-length picture. I do dream about it sometimes. Maybe, again, I am going a long way to return a short distance.

PH: *If you were not a director or involved in the theater what profession would you have chosen?*

MKH: I would have been an architect.

PH: *So it goes back to the creative side of you?*

MKH: Oh, I don't know, I do design for the stage. I am also a good plumber, a good carpenter and a good house painter, so who knows.

PH: *One of the things that I question when going to the theater Broadway, Off Broadway or Off Off Broadway is the scarcity of Iranian-Americans in the theater. Why is this? Is it because the emphasis on education is on medicine and engineering? And are we going to see more of the younger generation coming into the arts to perform?*

MKH: I hope we see more Iranian-Americans in this field. I hate to be one of the few. I think one reason for this shortage is that we as a people want to succeed financially and not only because we are encouraged to be doctors, lawyers and engineers. Theater is not the surest place to achieve financial success. I would never have been able to make a living being a director and doing the kind of projects I like. I make my living by teaching. Our parents insist on us becoming professionals not because they do not like the arts, but because they want us to be able to live a comfortable life. It is for each one of us as an individual to decide where our real happiness lies. Another reason is that the Iranians in America have to compete with a dominant culture different from their own. It is easier to win this competition in a profession that does not require such understanding and command of the language and the culture as is needed in theatre in order to communicate with the mostly American audience.

PH: *Not being Iranian but growing up close to the community, I see a struggle in the generation, who made a decision to live here permanently, to maintain their Iranian culture in their children. This applies to all ethnicity not just Iranians. Do you think that it is going to have a positive or negative*

impact on the children and can they be successful?

MKH: Well, I think the second and third generation Iranians here will probably become less Iranian and more American. That is the more realistic side of it, though it is not what I'd like to see. There are reasons for this. One is that we as Iranians are not group oriented. We seldom stick with one another. We expect too much from each other and are willing to give only a little. This too could probably be traced to our survival manual. Let me give you an example. When I was casting this last production, Rumi's Mathnavi, I very much wanted to have an Iranian actor among the cast who were from seven countries. I felt since the production is going to be multi-lingual, it would be good to have Persian (Rumi's own Language) spoken on stage as well. I called everyone I knew; Iranian friend, organizations, schools and even some Persian Radio and TV stations. I was unable to get even a simple announcement in. Two-thirds into the rehearsal process I heard that there was an Iranian picnic somewhere in a park. I drove there, my wife made an announcement. I was overwhelmed by the responses. Their expressions of support ranged from "I will be honored to sweep your stage" to "I will guarantee to bring at least 500 people to your performances." At last we had some Persian music and spoken text incorporated into the work. When the play was on stage, despite our mailing over two thousand post cards to the Iranian community, as well as numerous e-mails and phone calls, only a hand full Iranian friends showed up. We did however have an impressive crowd of Japanese, Spanish, Turks and other communities whose actors participated in this production, as well as the usual American audience. When the production ended we half heartily approached some of those who had made promises to "fill the house," who gave limp excuses. So, I am afraid that we do not have a supporting community, and that worries me when I think of our children and their connection to our culture. That is indeed ironic given the fact that Iranians are one of the most educated, most successful groups of immigrants in this country. Could it be that we do not feel the need to maintain close community relationship with one another due to our financial and social success? Do we consider participating in our communities activities as a sign of nationalism? What I

do know is that we, as a prosperous group of people, need to create more meaningful traditional, cultural and artistic relationships in our community, and that we have yet to do.

PH: Except in California?

MKH: Even in Southern California where we do have large numbers of Iranians living close to one another, still Iranian tradition, culture and art is not promoted as one expects. The cultural/artistic events that is predominant there is mostly nostalgic. It is as if the community is frozen in the Tehran of the 1970s. I know of many Iranian men and women of high literary and artistic achievements and standards whose children can not speak Persian, nor do they feel proud of being Iranian. This I hope is the exception and not the rule. You know, the most drastically destructive thing that has happened to our people in the past twenty years is that we have lost our pride. Both, inside and outside of our borders, as a nation, we have lost our pride. And to quote Nima, that "breaks sleep in my watery eyes." How can a nation survive when it feels no pride? How can people survive when they feel no pride? It is our job to keep this pride and instill that in our children. Nothing offends me more than when I see an Iranian youth, a student, a friend's child or just a young man or woman of Iranian descent who is shy about his/her Iranian origin and wants to hide that from his/her peers. Unfortunately I have seen this too often. It is really sad.

PH: Sitting before you are two women, who were born in the States and are at the least second generation Americans. I watched as my grandmother taught me the traditions of her culture. I do not however, gravitate to groups of that heritage, yet those traditions will be the ones passed to my children along with traditions and customs that are pure American such as Thanksgiving and Independence Day etc. Do you eventually see all these new ethnicities of the states coming together and through the mixture create new American traditions? And finally is it for the good of the child for the parents to distinguish their traditions?

MKH: Yes, I do believe they will come together and create a new tradition. But it will take a very long time and it may not be easy. Creating a new tradition, an American tradition, will happen as the time and circumstances dictate. To be American is your nationality not your ethnicity. America is still too young. My children may be American citizens but they also will have an Iranian identity. At least I hope they will. That is one of the beauties of this great melting pot we live in. You are allowed to be who you wish to be. You may face prejudices, but it is far less than what you face in other places including our own country because, like censorship, prejudice too is transparent. Of course I think that we as Iranian parents need to introduce our children to more than our Iranian culture and tradition. We live in a world that is constantly shrinking. I do want my daughters to be aware and proud of their Persian heritage, to be able to communicate in their mother tongue, to know that they were born to Iranian parents, to know that they were born during a turbulent time in Iran even though they are raised in America. I want to expand their global citizenship rather than replace one citizenship with another.

PH: It goes back to, as you said, dialogue. You are right we must all learn to understand and accept each other's cultures and traditions.

MKH: That is the way to the future, I think, and America is a suitable place for that. Here it is possible to celebrate our traditions as well as that of others. It is possible to enjoy each other's similarities as well as our differences. We need to teach our children that it is possible to be an American as well as an Iranian, to be proud of their heritage and respectful of their conditions, to maintain their cultural traditions and learn that of others, and to remain articulate in Persian and be fluent in English.

PH: Do you not think that at some point in all of our lives that we all become ashamed of her heritage, our name or our family?

MKH: This may be a natural maturing process. But if you have love and support at home, from a family who be-

lieves in your name, their culture and themselves, you will overcome this stage very quickly. Remember, many people may have to leave their birth country for one reason or another. Their move does not have to be a rejection of their culture and heritage. So even though they are physically separated, they could maintain their awareness of their traditional practices. I am sure the same proves to be true of Iranian immigrants. We have both our past and present to be proud of.

PH: Is there a closing statement you would like to make to our readers?

MKH: I wish and hope that we, as a community of high achievers, as an educated and productive minority, and as a successful and prosperous people help create a bridge between what we have been as a nation and what we are as immigrants, between the Iranian-American youth and their American peers, and between the less fortunate people of our country and the people of the world.

I wish and hope that we as scholars, educators, and creative artists continue to introduce the masterpieces of our scientific, literary and artistic heritage to the world at large, so our people may not be looked down upon as uncivilized, primitive, and a backward society.

I wish and hope that our country prospers, our people flourish and communicate with one another, accept each other's ideological, cultural and professional differences, and celebrate our similarities.

And I wish and hope that we increase our understanding and support of one another and our communities, both within and without our geographic borders.

And I thank you for allowing me this wonderful opportunity.

We are pleased to announce that Mahmood Karimi Hakak has accepted an Associate professorship with southern Methodist University in Dallas. Mr. Hakak will be teaching as well as directing plays at the University. Mr. Hakak's next theatre production, Luigi Pirandello's "Six Characters in Search of an Author," will open October 28, 2001 at TSU.

AN INTERVIEW WITH MS. ELAINE SCIOLINO



By: Shahrokh Ahkami

Elaine Sciolino, feature interview of this issue and senior writer for the Washington bureau of the *New York Times*, has been named the winner of the 2001 New York Book Award For Excellence in Journalism for her book, *Persian Mirrors: The Elusive Face of Iran*. The award has a monthly prize value of \$15,000 and was given to her at a luncheon. The award recognizes journalists and their role in drawing public attention to current issues.

*SA: Ms. Sciolino, I have read your book *The Persian Mirror*, twice, and am fascinated with your accounts of Iran. As a journalist you have a wonderful reputation, how was it that you became interested in Iran and Iranians?*

ES: Well in fact it was by accident. My background at the university was in 18th Century French history. So I knew about the French Revolution and decided to write my doctoral dissertation on Louis Sebastian Mercier, who was a journalist and a utopian during the French revolution. I was a junior correspondent with Newsweek magazine in Paris when Khomeini arrived. Of course I was a young eager journalist and offered to go out and cover his arrival for the magazine. At the time he was living in Neauphle Le Chateau and that is how it all began.

SA: It was my understanding that it was difficult to get close

to him after he arrived, how were you able to do this?

ES: I got to know Sadegh Ghotbzadeh early on through a friend, Jonathan Randal, from *The Washington Post*. My memory of meeting Ghotbzadeh for the first time remains clear. It was at a little café on a Saturday afternoon, three days after Khomeini's arrival. As we sat there, Ghotbzadeh turned to me and said it was too bad that I did not have a head scarf. I asked why and he told me had I had one he would have taken me to meet Khomeini. I told him to give me ten minutes. Frantically I searched for and found a scarf in the shops, then off we were to meet Ayatollah Khomeini. There were maybe five to ten students, a few clerics, Mr. Ghotbzadeh, Jonathan and me with him. Later when it was time to interview him, I was the first woman and the first American to do so. He was not well known to most Americans at this point. Even my editors at *Newsweek* were not sure that the interview would be important enough

to run. I told them that I thought that this man was going to be very important.

SA: *You were obviously able to convince them that the story was important.*

ES: Yes, and I became fascinated with his story. When the Ayatollah returned to Iran, I was one of the only women on that trip, another was Carol Jerome a Canadian journalist. Looking back on the flight it was far more dangerous than we anticipated. Khomeini believed it to be dangerous enough to not allow any Iranian women on the flight. Apparently, General Amir-Hossein Rabii, the head of the Iranian Air Force at the time had contacted Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was then National Security Advisor, with a plan to blow up the plane before its landing in Tehran. Brzezinski brought the plan to President Carter, who wanted no part of that arrangement, but that did not mean that the Carter administration rejected the idea that the Iranians do it themselves.

SA: *What was your first impression of the Ayatollah Khomeini?*

ES: This is one of the questions I am routinely asked. My first impression was not much different from those who never met him and only knew him through the media. He was a very stern and serious man. A man who did not know how to respond to someone like me, an American journalist and a woman. We made very little eye contact throughout the interview. I think it was only once and I believe it was only out of his curiosity. He also smiled once when his little grandson ran into the room and sat on his lap. It was a very interesting experience. The Ayatollah sat on one side of the room and I on the other. There were no photographers allowed. It would not have been good politics for him to have had a picture with an American reporter. I also was expected to take off my shoes and sit on my legs, something we Americans are not used to doing, but I must say all of this added to the mood of the interview.

SA: *You mentioned the name Carol Jerome, wasn't she the girlfriend of Sadegh Ghotbzadeh? She also wrote a very good book that just never took off.*

ES: Yes, and I agree it was a very interesting book. She is an excellent journalist and of course being among the only women covering this event, we bonded. .

SA: *What was your impression of Ghotbzadeh since there are various opinions of him whatever your political association?*

ES: Well, I can only speak from my personal experiences and I found him a gentleman and very helpful. He obviously believed in Ayatollah Khomeini and had a close relationship with him. His goals and also the goals of Khomeini and the other lieutenants were the same. They wanted to get a positive message across to the people of Iran and the world about their leader and Sadegh accomplished this.

SA: *How did you actually obtain permission to be on that flight?*

ES: The passenger list included one-hundred and forty foreign journalists. I often describe it as the first hostage situation. Peter Jennings was one of the passengers. I guess with so many members of the foreign press plus television celebrities and camera crews on board there was a reluctance not to do anything with the airplane.

SA: *There was much talk about the attitude of Khomeini on the trip back to Iran.*

ES: Well if you are referring to his emotion, he did have a strange attitude. During the trip, my friend and colleague Peter Jennings made his way up to Khomeini and proceeded to ask the famous question, "Ayatollah, could you be so kind to tell us how you feel about being back in Iran?" Khomeini replied "Hiche" (nothing). We were all stunned including Ghotbzadeh, who turned to him and said "Hiche?" Khomeini replied "Hiche ehsasi nadaram" (I don't feel a thing).

SA: *So this was not a rumor but the truth?*

ES: Yes. In fact when I was doing research for the book I asked ABC for a copy of that tape and listened to it repeatedly to make sure I had it right.

SA: *What happened once you landed in Tehran?*

ES: I don't think I will ever forget this. We circled the airport three times and almost did not land. Can you imagine what it was like looking at the tarmac and seeing the Shah's troops? By the third time I saw the Damavand Mountain, I was getting nervous and realized this trip was not going to be as easy as expected. When we did land there was total chaos. I was listening to Khomeini speak and heard him say he would cut off the hands of the foreigners. Immediately my hand froze and I began to question what I got myself into. I saw Ghotbzadeh and asked him to help me. I didn't know where to go and the streets were filled with a million people. He pushed me into a bus and told me to go wherever it went and that I would be okay. I got in looked around and then found out it was the bus with everyone from the old Bazar-gan camp. There was Mehdi Bazargan, the old Sahabi, young Sahabi and all the future leaders of the provisional government.

SA: *What was the demeanor of Mr. Bazargan?*



ES: Well, when I got on the bus and realized it was he we conversed a little in French. He welcomed me to Iran and offered me sweets and a helping hand. I found him to be a man dedicated to the cause and one who truly believed in the Islamic Republic and its ideals. He eventually felt betrayed.

SA: *The title of the your book is Persian Mirrors, how was the title developed?*

ES: I had a terrible time picking a title for the book, it literally took months. People were constantly making suggestions but none moved me. I knew that I did not want the title to have the word "veil" in it. It had to be a title that captured the complexity of the country and not just the Islamic Republic, because Iran was and is more than Islam. The title finally came to me during a visit to Reza Shah's Green Palace. The reception room

is filled with thousands of pieces of mirror mosaics and the chandeliers in the room make the mirrors dazzle. It made the room brilliantly wonderful, warm and inviting. As I walked around the room I tried to look at myself in the mirrors. I could not see myself and it was that image that I wanted to be reflected in the title and the book. Iran is so complex, especially for a foreigner. There are no simple declarations that one can make of Iran as a country, society or of a people. And so the title *Persian Mirrors*.

SA: *Do you see this complexity that you refer to as a positive or a negative for Iran and Iranians?*

ES: I see it as a reality. The complexity is a positive in the sense that Iran's greatest resource is its people not its oil. The same people who rant against the United States will invite Americans into their home and treat them like family. But, this complexity is a negative in the sense that it makes it very difficult for an outsider to understand what is being said. So, it is also very difficult for American foreign policy makers to demystify or deconstruct Iran.

SA: *In the book you talk about the many homes of Iranians that you visited during your visits to Iran, how did you find the homes?*

ES: To answer this question I'd like to go back to your first question on how I became interested in Iran. I grew up in the same house as my grandparents. My Sicilian grandfather was the first to teach me that anything and everything that is important in life must be kept in the family. He would constantly carry on about foreigners. So in my family there were a series of concentric circles. You had the immediate family, the extended family and then everybody else who came from the same village in Italy. The people never to trust, according to my grandfather, were the people from the State. They were the enemy no matter what. They were the people who would change the tax assess-

ment on your house if you allowed them in for a cup of coffee. That actually happened to us so I guess that was the catalyst for my grandfather's mistrust of strangers. So I grew up in this kind of mentality and it helped me to better understand the Iranian thought process. This, for some reason, allowed the Iranians to trust me and therefore they invited me in. It was behind the closed doors of the Iranian home that people relaxed, and it was from these warm invitations that I did my best reporting.

SA: *How did you get the invitations into the homes?*

ES: Many ways. I can still remember visiting Qom. I was there because the Ayatollah Khomeini went there a few weeks after his return to Iran after the Revolution. My traveling companion was a nephew of Khomeini by marriage. His name was Ruhollah and we called him Rocky Khomeini. Before the Revolution he was a disc jockey on an English radio station in Iran. Ruhollah was very westernized. He had been educated in the States. Anyway, we went to Qom and he knocked on the door of all his relatives, one of whom was Khomeini's daughter. We ended up having lunch with her. It was a wonderful way of getting a different insight into the world of Ayatollah Khomeini. I could never have done this without this contact.

SA: *In comparison to Khomeini how did you find his family?*

ES: They were very protective of him especially in the early days, but were also stunned and exhilarated by the turn of events that brought him back to Iran. No one, including Khomeini ever expected that this would ever happen. During his exile in Paris, Khomeini was planning on moving to another Islamic country closer to Iran, but not Iran.

SA: *So it was a shock to the family?*

ES: Exactly.

SA: *Let's talk a little bit about your observations of Iran, the country. You make a comparison between Teheran and Shiraz, why?*

ES: I think and see Tehran as a ruined city. There has been so much building since the sixties and for the most part it has been terrible architecture. When you enter Tehran, the first thing that hits you is not the beauty of the old buildings but the pollution and the traffic. In order to live in Tehran you have to find refuge. Some people go to people's homes or to the mountains. I use to make my hotel room my refuge. I would always bring flowers in and make sure that there was caviar chilled in the refrigerator. I filled my walls with maps and pictures of my family. For me Tehran is a cold city. Once I took a tour of the city with an architect and we tried to find old buildings. It became a very difficult task. When we did find them they were in need of renovation. Finding beauty in Tehran is quite difficult.

Shiraz on the other hand is different. I fell in love with the city because of the poetry and the people. Of course it has its share of pollution but it still has charm. For instance Thursday evenings the streets and parks are filled with people picnicking. This says something about their spirit. They accept the Islamic Republic as long as it does not interfere with their customs and way of life, especially Thursday evenings. Shirazi's seem to have a great sense of moderation and balance and a good sense of welcoming and of course it is the heart of Persian poetry.

SA: *I am getting the feeling that on your first visit to Tehran that you did not expect to see such a modern city?*

ES: I have to tell you I have seen just about every big city in the Middle East and in every city I go in search of the beauty of its architecture. I even did this in Damascus. Today you can still find those beautiful 19th century buildings with the medal terraces and balconies, but it is a challenge. I think that Tehran is beginning to understand the importance of preserving, not just the palaces but, all of the old architecture, especially the areas around the bazaar.

SA: *What changes have you seen in Iran and the people over the last twenty years?*

ES: At the beginning of the revolution people were petrified to talk about the revolution and politics and whether the



changes being made were for the better or worse. Then that fear subsided. When I returned a few months ago, however, people whom I knew for many years were again afraid to speak to me because they are currently in a period I call, "The Big Chill". Consequently, journalists, feminists and lawyers were reluctant to converse with me. Yet, there still remains a sense of openness in the air that clearly shows that change is inevitable. It will happen and Iranians know that they are in charge of their own destiny. Even with the closing of the presses there are still places where you can go to express your feelings and exchange viewpoints. And of course there is the reopening of the cinema and Parliament. People do remain skeptical since so many promises of the Revolution have been broken. This is the unfinished business that continues to be played out in Iran today in terms of politics and reform.

SA: Do you think that the people are better off now or prior to the Revolution?

ES: That is a question that is not for me to answer, because I don't think that I am in a position to predict how life would have played out for the country and the people had the Shah remained in power. Maybe it is a question for the political scientist. Yes, there are some people who are better off. The clerics who made a lot of money with the Revolution are better off. The fact that medical care and universal schooling exists also says they are better off. The people who live in the villages now have electricity, they are better off. On the other hand were people's lives ruined? Absolutely. Were families destroyed because of the years of war? Yes, but in the end who really knows the answer? Maybe life under the Shah would have been more tyrannical? Would Iran have become a nuclear power and an adventurous one at that? I don't know and I am uncomfortable in giving an opinion.

SA: On an educational level how did Iranians compare?

ES: One of the most important goals in writing this book was to do a cross section of all the people and their classes. Journalists are often criticized for only socializing with people of Teheran who speak English, take a trip to Qom, go to Esfahan to talk to the merchants and then

leave with a story. This was not my goal. I tried to see the entire country and in fact went to the caves in near Azberbaijan. I spoke to the people on the streets of Teheran. I know that this is going to sound like a cliché but every Iranian I know and have met in my life has some sense of feeling for the United States and the people. It is hard to find someone who does not have family or know someone who is living in the States.... So I was always welcomed.

Let me give you an example just how attached Iranians and Iran are to the States. On the tenth anniversary of the shooting down, by the United States, of the Iran Air civilian plane, I was asked if I wanted to go along for the memorial services they were going to have for those who lost their lives. We were ferried to the middle of the Gulf. On the ferry were the families of the victims including the father of the pilot. You can only imagine that it was a very anti-American day. When I spoke to the pilot's father he told me about his other son who lived in the United States. So again there is a very deep connection between Iran and the States.

SA: So the "Death To America" slogan has subsided?

ES: Yes, as well as other strong anti-American sentiments. You know another interesting observation I made was during the hostage takeover. I was covering the story outside of the Embassy and at that time without a head scarf. While the cameras were rolling all you could hear were the chants "Death to America". Once the cameras were turned off these same people would come over to talk with me asking me how to get a visit or to call their families. I was also in Iran during the 1999 riots. I often say the day I felt the safest on the streets was not on the day of the riots and the tear gas or watching the thugs beat up the people with their green batons, but rather the day when everyone was out in the streets screaming Marg Bar Amrika, because this was a staged demonstration. The demonstrators had their roles and I as a journalist had mine and I watched this theater perform.

SA: How did you find Persian food?

ES: Again a very interesting question to which my answer will be somewhat surprising. As a foreigner the only way you

get to have real Persian food in Iran is if you get an invitation to someone's private home. There are no classic Persian restaurants in the country and it took me a long time to realize this. If you are fortunate to get the invite, you will eat well and you will eat a lot. Food in the Iranian home is a bonding device. It bridges the gaps. Of course you always have one memorable meal and mine took place during the celebration of Eftar during the breaking of the fast. I was covering a trip of Khatami to Yazd and had the wonderful luck of being invited to share the occasion with his family. We sat on the floor and I was served first and the best of everything. They could not have made me feel any more at home.

SA: And your favorite food?

ES: I don't know if I could say it is my favorite but certainly it is my most memorable. It is ghormeh sabzi. I speak a small amount of Persian, enough to exchange a cordial greeting. On one occasion I exchanged greeting with President Khatami and afterwards he chastised me for not speaking more Persian having been in the country so many times. I agreed with him. He then asked me if I cook Persian food. My interpreter answered him on my behalf saying that I knew how to cook ghormeh sabzi. When I found out what she said I told her that what she should have done was asked him if he cooked Persian food. We all laughed.



SA: You seem to like Yazd. To me it is one of the most interesting cities.

ES: Yes and it for the most part remains untouched by tourists and therefore remains authentic. The architecture of the city, its mud walls are simply outstanding. My first visit was in 1998 and I have returned three times since then. On one occasion I went to cover a speech that Khatami was going to give. He took forty Iranian male journalists with him and most of them had never visited Yazd. I ended up being their tour guide. On a visit to the Zoroastrian shrine I was amused watch-

ing them busily purchasing souvenirs from a kiosk. It was interesting to see that a group of sophisticated men, some of whom had traveled to the United States, had not visited this beautiful and interesting city.

SA: Is there any observation of your experiences in Iran that has burnt a place in your memory?

ES: It is a tough question, because there are many but I guess I would say that my most memorable observations were made during the first few days of the Revolution. Seeing history being made with the return of Khomeini and the events of the following eleven days on the streets in Iran were simply incredible. To watch the military turn over its arms to the clerics was amazing. I can remember standing

on a corner in a daze not really knowing or understanding the true significance of what was happening. A colleague of mine was standing next to me. I can remember thinking that here I was a journalist in the process of writing about a journalist who lived and

covered a revolution two hundred years ago and now I am experiencing first hand my own revolution. To watch history being made was awesome and huge, that at times I cannot even comprehend it. Some of the soldiers guns had carnations in the rifles, this came after the terrible night of shooting at the Doshan Tappeh Air Base in which a dear friend of mine, Joe Alex Morris lost his life.

SA: Did you find any similarities between the French Revolution and this revolution?

ES: There has been some sound research done on this comparison. I tend to stay away from these types of analogies. There are some historians who say that it took two hundred years for the French revolution to end and think that the Iranian revolution still being played out. The battles being fought are the same ones that were being fought in the first few days of

the Revolution. The questions that still remain are what is an Islamic republic, how much power should go to it, the people or to the clerics and how do you define the world's first modern theocracy.

SA: Can you share your saddest moment?

ES: The war front of the Iran-Iraq war. We were taken to the Iraqi side of the border where we were sure chemical warfare was used against Iran. In fact we were the first neutral eye witnesses to the use of chemical weapons on the battle field. To say the least it was a chilling and terrifying experience.

SA: The gulf syndrome is present here today. American soldiers are just beginning to show the effects of this kind of warfare.

ES: Yes, and I wonder what is still to come. Can you imagine being taken to battle field seeing these bodies with no visible signs of death? This was in the marshes in the south.

SA: And your happiest moment?

ES: There were many. On one occasion we were driving to Kurdistan. I was enthralled with the beauty of the surrounding mountains I was amazed to see rice paddies in the Mazandaran Province. It is moments like this that made you aware of the grandness of this country with its diverse country side and extraordinary nature.

I would also like to share another example of the beauty of Iran, not of its natural beauty but the beauty of the people who are its citizens. Journalists again are often so overwhelmed with reporting that they overlook one of the most significant characteristics of this country and that is the poetry. I remember stopping for tea in a road house in the Mazandaran Province. We were on our way back from the Caspian. I was always fascinated with the abacus and I told this to the driver and our local correspondent as I watched the owner of the tea house work on his. He also heard me and offered it to me. I was also aware that to accept this gift would have been bad manners so we worked out a compromise. We exchanged a *New York Times* bag for

the abacus and all walked away happy. To celebrate the occasion a man who rented a room in the tea house started playing his flute and singing love songs. People outside heard this and started to come in and join the celebration. Much to my amazement my driver Mr. Salimi started to recite poetry. I told him I was surprised to see this side of him to which he replied "in this country everyone loves poetry everyone loves Khayyam." It was then I got the true sense of the magical side of the Iranian soul.

SA: Before we end this interview, could you be kind enough to tell us a little bit about your family?

ES: I have a wonderful husband who I met in a magical way on the Long Island Railroad. We have two daughters Gabriela who is eleven and Alessandra who is twelve. All were very helpful in writing this book. Weaving twenty years of experience into one book was a very frustrating experience. Alessandra is the nurturing type. She would try to ease my frustrations by bringing me tea and notes of encouragement. Gabriela on the other hand is a questioner. From her questions, I could see Iran through a child's eyes. For instance, she would ask me why Iranian women would get their hair done if they had to wear head scarves. This was a good question and I replied by telling her that they have a sense of pride in the way they look. And, of course, my husband, with his legal pen and eye was my best editor.

SA: Do they have a desire to visit Iran?

ES: Very much so. Unfortunately we have not been able to coordinate our schedules. And I won't put my daughters in head scarves.

SA: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

ES: I think we have had a marvelous time together and this has been a wonderful opportunity for me. My best to all of year readers and, of course, I wish you and the magazine the best of luck in reaching your goals.

You have done a wonderful job and it is something that is very valuable for both Iranian and non-Iranian people. ■

