

adverse
camber
productions

The Shahnameh

THE EPIC BOOK OF KINGS



The Shahnameh

THE EPIC BOOK OF KINGS

Created and performed by

Xanthe Gresham Knight
Storyteller

Arash Moradi
shurangiz, daf, setar

Originally commissioned by the British Museum, with support from the Smithsonian, Iran Heritage, Asia House and the Magic of Persia. Developed for national touring by Adverse Camber.

The performance takes place in two halves with an interval

Welcome to tonight's performance and thank you for coming!

Shahnameh (the book of kings) was written by the Persian/Iranian poet Ferdowsi over 1,000 years ago. Composed in Farsi over a thirty year period, Ferdowsi's epic blends myth, legend and the historical stories of successive Kings of Iran, from the dawn of time to the fall of the Persian empire in the 7th Century. Comprising over 50,000 lines of verse, it is the longest poem by a single author every written.

This performance offers a hand-picked collection of stories from the epic, through a combination of crafted poetry, evocative music and effervescent storytelling created by Xanthe Gresham Knight and Arash Moradi. Just as Ferdowsi gathered together source materials when creating his epic, so Xanthe and Arash combine inspiration from Ferdowsi's material with their own distinctive voices, to share their interpretation of the epic with you. Discover more about their creative process in this programme or on our website.

As always, with storytelling, this work truly comes alive in the presence of audiences, so thank you for being part of a shared experience tonight. As with all Adverse Camber performances, we thrive on the feedback of our audiences, so please do share your responses with us.

Enjoy the evening!



Naomi Wilds, Producer



Xanthe Gresham Knight, on working with *Shahnameh*

Although I have been telling stories from the *Shahnameh* for many years, I feel I'm just at the beginning with this enormous epic. I have learned so much about the art of Naqali, Iranian performance storytelling, from working with Ferdowsi's poem. It naturally lends itself to improvisation, audience participation and drama. The unparalleled music of Arash Moradi, who has such a repertoire of songs and maqams, some traditionally used for key characters in *The Shahnameh*, is the spirit and soul of Ferdowsi.

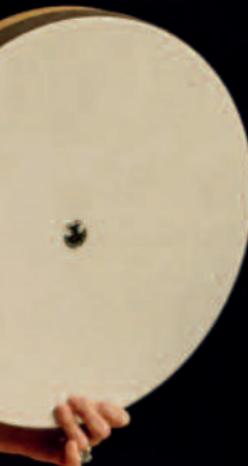


Brilliant and consummate poet that he was, Ferdowsi used every timeless, universal and resonant image available. Combining a number of translations, I've kept whatever struck me as beautiful.

The original verses rhyme and I've put long sections into verse. It's been a revelation how comfortable it feels to perform, especially as, over the years I've been working with the material, the rhymes have settled down and it's become clear where they need to overlap with prose.

The story of Sohrab and Rostam is the furthest I've gone down this pathway and with the beat of the daf, it's intoxicating to perform. Anyone looking for a good current translation of *Shahnameh*, to discover more for themselves, couldn't do better than Dick Davies' version available in Penguin Classics.

For the storytelling, I have made a creative adaptation of the stories. *The Shahnameh* has elements of nationalism which, being a pacifist, I've tried to downplay. I've also augmented the feminine where possible, while trying to retain the full blooded warrior energy that gives the stories such kick.



خرد چشم جانست
چون بنگری
تو بی چشم
جهان نسپری

Knowledge is the
eye of our life

Without eyes our
life is hard and dark

Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*

In the 7th Century, the Persian empire fell to the Arab conquest. Over the next few hundred years, the sympathies and cultures of particular regions across a vast area shifted continually between old and new allegiances. In the 10th Century, the Samanid dynasty, ruling North Eastern Iran and central Afghanistan, was keen to demonstrate its rule as descending from older Persian traditions. They commissioned translations from ancient Iranian. They spoke new Persian, rather than Arabic at court. Under their guidance, 'a court poetry of great brilliance, in Persian, soon began to flourish'¹, involving a rich array of poets, male and female.

Ferdowsi, living in the North Eastern Iranian city of Tus, began writing the *Shahnameh* in this vibrant cultural atmosphere. He was not based at court, but wrote from his own estate and was given a tax break to help him by the local governor. Legend has it, he was promised a gold coin for every verse he wrote by the ruling Sultan. A later poet recorded that he wrote the poem to provide a dowry for his only daughter, confident in the reward he would ultimately receive.

Ferdowsi gathered both written and oral sources for his epic. These included epic cycles memorised and transmitted through the generations by Zoroastrian (pre-Islamic) priests as well as oral stories shared in the chaikhanas or teahouses by travelling storytellers, or naqqal. He incorporated into his poem writings by other poets, notably verses about Zoroastrian history and beliefs by Daqiqi – he credited him - who was murdered before he finished his own book of kings.

چونک اندر آورد با او زمین
 فرو کرد گرز از انرا بر زمین
 به بندگش اندر آورد
 چنانکه او شش از دست زمین



<p>نیانده و ال کسر پاید بناییدارستم همی پشت یکباره ترنگ زشت</p>	<p>ز جنگ سپیدار و سنگ سپیدار جو از جنگ سپیدار ترگان بشد زرد</p>	<p>دیند روز جنگ خستیش یا سواران گرفتند کرد اندر همی بر سر خاستم دست</p>	<p>همی خواستش بر دیند و قباد کت و خاک اندر اند سرش چراکت گرفتیش ز کیش</p>
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Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*

Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* is comprised of 50,000 lines of rhyming couplets in a classical Persian poetic form. It is twice as long as the Iliad and Odyssey put together. The metrical rhythm lends itself to the pounding of battle and hunting or the lyricism of romances. Rhythm and rhyme make the poem highly memorable, preserving and enabling stories of myth, legend and history from the pre-Islamic era to be passed on to future generations.

As well as compiling historically valid accounts of generations of Persian kings, Ferdowsi was keen to reflect on ethics and values. These revolve around questions of what make a good man, a good hero, and, crucially, a good ruler. Ferdowsi used every exquisite image he could wrestle from his own imagination and the universally potent images sourced from the great poets of his day. The result is a vast, hypnotic, arresting work that deals with good, evil, truth, lies, war, love and peace.

Through his poem, Ferdowsi established classical Persian (Farsi/Parsi) as a language of great beauty and sophistication. He used words in common parlance for the literate elite at that time, blended with middle Persian words from previous centuries, still accessible to Persian readers today. The work influenced epic and poetic writers for centuries afterwards – many scholars credit the continuity of modern Persian to the *Shahnameh*.

By the time of the poem's completion, rule had passed to a new dynasty. Legend has it that Ferdowsi refused the silver, rather than gold coins, offered by the then ruling king. When the king reconsidered, and went to offer gold, he was met by Ferdowsi's coffin travelling in the other direction. Ferdowsi recorded in the poem his own confidence that his work would ultimately secure his fame and he was proved satisfyingly right.

1 From introduction to Penguin Classics *Shahnameh*, translation by Dick Davies

The Musical Traditions of Shahnameh

Arash Moradi was born in the North West region of Kurdish Iran, a musically rich area, to a musical family – his father Ali Akbar Moradi is Iran's leading tanbur player. For centuries, the music of the tanbur has been considered sacred within this community, with songs and chants preserved and passed on through transmission from master to apprentice across generations.

Persian classical music works through a combination of improvisation and composition around seven modes (scales and tunes) each with a particular character. Learning respect for the music as well as openness to the personal response of each musician is integral to how it is taught.



Compositions alternate between contemplative pieces and athletic displays of musicianship, and incorporate lyrics written by Sufi poets. In 2009, radifs (the body of modes, often distinctive to the teachings of each master) were registered on the UNESCO List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

In creating the music for this performance, Arash works with the modes of Persian classical, Kurdish maqam and Sufi music, the qualities of the story and the style of each instrument, as well as themes known to be associated with characters. While setar and tanbur are traditional instruments with long histories, the shurangiz is a relatively new instrument more suitable to Persian classical music.

In a drive to protect music kept alive in the Kurdish Yarsan community for thousands of years, Arash's father, Ali Akbar Moradi spent decades collecting, learning and recording

72 original and sacred maqams so that contemporary musicians could improvise and create new compositions rooted in traditional culture. Arash makes great use of this legacy, using instruments with a variety of phrases and colours that enable him to capture the different textures and qualities of each story.

Music is an integral feature within the storytelling tradition associated with the *Shahnameh*. Rustam is said to have discovered the first tanbur hanging in a tree. He took it down and found his fingers fit the strings perfectly. There is still a maqam called Tarze Rustam which is believed to be over 1000 years old.

Music is also combined with martial arts, calisthenics and strength training in the traditions of the 'House of Strength', a system for passing on values and training warriors in Iran and said to have been practiced by Rustam. In the traditional circular gymnasium, with a sunken floor, audience, musicians and athletes are separated into different areas. The morshed, or master, leads the athletes in their training sometimes with extracts from the *Shahnameh* to inspire them.



Characters

Rustam: Hero

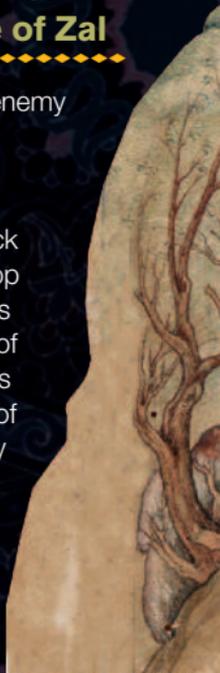
Rustams' life spans hundreds of years. His legendary exploits are a thread through the many volumes of Shahnameh. Rustam was mixed race, his father Zal was from Zabulistan on the Eastern border of Iran and his mother Rudabeh was from the enemy Kabul in Central Asia. Solo, Rustam can take out an army, outwit demons and wield the strings of the mesmeric tanbur, the only instrument that can calm his war rage. Despite his heroic credentials, Rustam likes nothing better than feasting in his home town of Zabulistan where he is constantly disturbed and exploited by a series of Shahs who need his powers to bring down their enemies.

Zal: Father of Rustam

Zal is the most inspirational character with the attribute of albinism in the history of literature. Abandoned in the mountains, the magical Simorgh, equivalent to the mysterious phoenix, raised him with her young. At one with nature, running with the birds and in tune with the seasons, Zal's strength and beauty are matched in his marriage to Rudabeh, enemy Princess of Kabul.

Rudabeh: Mother of Rustam and wife of Zal

Princess of Kabul and enemy of Iran, Rudabeh is the prototype for Rapunzel, possessing hair that cascades in a thick black musky lasso from the top of her tower to the roses beneath. The marriage of Zal and Rudabeh stands for the idealistic power of youth that can fearlessly overcome the enmity of their ancestors.



The Simorgh: Mythical bird

Behind all the stories of Rustam are the shimmering wings of the multicoloured Simorgh. She is a symbol that catches the imagination of young and old. Rustam only has to burn one of her feathers and wherever she is in the world, she will come to his aid. Stories of the Simorgh are cherished by Iranians who heard them in childhood and continue to reflect on her power and example. (In *The Conference of the Birds* by Persian writer Farid ud-Din Attar, the Simorgh is the holy grail of all quests. 30 birds seek her only to find that her name, Simorgh, means 30 birds.)



Characters

Tahmina: Wife of Rustam

Half human and half peri, half fairy, the Princess of Samangan, Tahmina, is a contemporary heroine. She woos Rustam with forthright and passionate conviction. She wants his child. Powerless to resist, Rustam submits. Rustam and Tahmina's romance only lasts one night but her mission is accomplished, Sohrab is conceived. Consequently Tahmina brings up their son single handedly.

Rakhsh: Horse of Rustam

The only one strong enough to carry Rustam's weight, the name Rakhsh means "shining one" and the horse is the colour of "rose leaves scattered on saffron." He gallops across the tips of the grass bearing his master from adventure to adventure. Loyal friend and champion, Rakhsh carries Rustam through life and into death.

Sohrab: Son of Tahmina

Whelp of the great hero Rustam, Sohrab is reputed to be bigger, better, braver and stronger than his father. Sohrab means "shining one." He is a child prodigy who could have changed the course of history.

Bizan and Manizeh: Lovers

The Shahnameh is full of love stories and the tale of Bizan, Prince of Iran and Manizeh, Princess of Turan is a favourite. Their love unites two warring kingdoms. Of course true love never runs smoothly...

The Demons: Shapeshifters

The Demons are a quixotic blend of humour and aggression. It is thanks to them that stories were created in the first place.

Illustration: Basawan. The Flight of the Simurgh.
ca. 1590, Sadruddin Aga Khan Collection



A woman with long brown hair, wearing a vibrant red and gold patterned dress with a blue shawl, is captured in a dynamic pose. She is holding a large, flowing red and gold fabric aloft with her right arm, while her left hand is extended forward. The background is dark, making the colors of her costume stand out.

Xanthe Gresham Knight

Xanthe Gresham Knight has been delighting audiences with stories for over 20 years. Her work is energetic, distinctive and full of humour and has captivated audiences all over the world. Her stories of the Shahnameh have been shaped by many visits to the British Library studying different translations, performing to audiences of all ages and years of dreaming on the characters.

Xanthe is a graduate of Oxford University and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. She has been awarded Storytelling Residencies at Harvard University, The Chelsea Physic Garden and Stoke and Staffordshire Libraries.

She is currently Storyteller in Residence for Psychologies Magazine, was Storytelling Educator for Tate Britain for five years and Lecturer in Drama and Storytelling at the University of East London for fourteen.

Xanthe also performs the *Goddess Tales*, described as 'a series of minor miracles as she morphs from one goddess to another,' performed at The Barbican, The National, Northern Stage and The Cheltenham Literature Festival.

www.xanthegresham.co.uk

Arash Moradi

Arash Moradi was born in the Kurdish city of Kermanshah in Western Iran. He is the eldest son of Iran's leading tanbur player Ali Akbar Moradi.

Arash started learning this ancient artform from an early age from his father whom he has since accompanied in numerous concerts and festivals throughout the world.

Arash lives in London where he teaches tanbur and runs workshops on Persian music. He has collaborated with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the London Philharmonic. He also actively promotes Kurdish music.

www.parvazensemble.co.uk



Illustrations of the Shahnameh

We're told that Ferdowsi wrote two editions of his manuscript, one compiled in 999 CE and the second completed in 1010. A surviving edition in Ferdowsi's own handwriting, however, has never been found. The earliest surviving manuscripts date from 200 years after his death - the earliest known copy, dated c 1217 and discovered as recently as 1977 is held in Florence's National Library. The next oldest known manuscript (1276) and is in the British Library – a single volume without illustrations.

During Ferdowsi's lifetime, books were reproduced by hand, book production was labour-intensive and expensive. A basic manuscript could cost as much as a horse. Adding illustrations increased the expense.

No two editions have precisely the same textual content, as scribes making copies frequently edited and made mistakes.

As time passed, *Shahnameh* manuscript copies began to include illustrations – frequently miniature watercoloured paintings. Earlier illustrated manuscripts have the artwork contained neatly within the borders of a container box within the page. In later manuscripts, the illustrations flow out of the boxes, spreading into the margins as if to consume the heroes and text alike. At times the minatures threaten to dominate the page.

The gold leaf illustrations illuminating the *Shahnameh* manuscripts reveal that the demons were as fascinating to their audiences as comic book and fantasy characters are today. Wreathed in snakes, decked with horns, hooved, hairy, and alive with colour, the demons catapult across the elegant pages with elemental vigour.



Creative Team

A creative team worked with Xanthe and Arash to shape the version of *The Shahnameh* shared with you from several hour-long selections of stories they have developed.

Collaborating Director: Kate Higginbottom

Kate Higginbottom is a writer, director and performer with a background in theatre, physical theatre, film, music and dance. Her principle work as director has been with *Nicole & Martin*, creating staged versions of Grimm's tales. Kate studied English Literature at Cambridge, Theatre Performance and Creation at the École International de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq, Paris, Dance at Laban London and the European Dance Development Centre in Holland. As a performer and deviser she has worked with many international companies, including Complicite, Herdeg&Desponds, and Theatre O.

Design Assistant: Claudine Scheer

Born in Luxembourg, Claudine studied Theatre Design at the University of Central England, Birmingham. She currently works at Vivid Design Works, an Event Design Company in South East London as a painter, seamstress and general PA alongside work in theatre, making props and costumes.

Technical Manager: Gethin Stacey

Gethin Stacey runs Sound Hire Wales, supplying high quality sound and lighting for events large and small across the UK. This is his second production with Adverse Camber, in addition to *Fire in the North Sky: Epic Tales from Finand*, also currently touring.



Associate Producer:
Louisa Davies

Louisa Davies is an independent creative producer, working on a range of projects encompassing music, spoken word, theatre and outdoor arts, alongside a part time role as Events Manager for the Royal Shakespeare Company. For ten years, she was the Producer – Performing Arts at mac birmingham, where she first discovered Adverse Camber. Louisa is a board member of Birmingham-based theatre company The Bone Ensemble.

Producer: Naomi Wilds

Naomi Wilds founded Adverse Camber in 2006. She has produced ten national tours for the company, raising substantial funds for artistic and organisational development. In 2009, Naomi was one of four East Midlands producers to receive a bursary from Arts Council England in recognition of her work. Naomi studied English Literature at the University of Leeds. She specialised in literature development from 1999-2008 as part of the East Midlands Literature Network.



Adverse Camber supports the ambitions of UK storytellers who are reaching for new horizons in their work. We work closely with partner venues to reach out to more diverse audiences, transporting people into the incredibly diverse soundscapes and imaginative material of these rich oral tales.

More about Adverse Camber

Adverse Camber is an independent production company, based amongst the historic mills of Cromford, Derbyshire. The company acts as a catalyst, bringing artists, partners, venues, audiences and funders together to create electrically charged performance encounters with storytelling and music.

We are inspired by the work of artists across many cultures for whom oral traditions are fundamental source material for their own creativity. In storytelling, artists and audiences are part of a shared experience, so audiences are at the heart of everything we do.

Adverse Camber is passionate about taking risks on behalf of creative work. This programme illuminates the source material and craft which has gone into creating this piece, the product of decades of work by artists who combine respect for ancient traditions with an enthusiasm for forging new pathways in contemporary culture. We draw creative teams around each piece we produce with the voices of artists at the centre of the process.

We really hope you enjoy the experience of tonight's performance, and join us for more Adverse Camber tours. Please like us on Facebook or Twitter and sign up for our newsletters to get first news of more shows coming soon.

Special thanks to our funders Arts Council England and the National Lottery to whom we are exceptionally grateful, our venue partners, and everyone in the growing Adverse Camber team.

Adverse Camber Team
Producer Naomi Wilds
Artistic Advisor Paula Crutchlow
Marketing Associates
Jenny Babenko
and Palmer Squared
PR Associate Rob Allen
Associate Producer Louisa Davies
Assistant Producer Amy Marsh
Participation Associate
Jan Reynolds

Look out for our future tours:

***Fire in the North Sky:
Epic Tales from Finland
(Saatuja Sanoja).***

with storyteller Nick Hennessey and three virtuoso musicians from Finland

***The Fourth Branch of the
Mabinogi***

with storyteller Michael Harvey, singer Lynne Denman and composer/musician Stacey Blythe

With special thanks for their support on ***The Shahnameh***: mac birmingham, Union Chapel London, Marion Leeper and Cambridge Storytellers, Daniel Pitt and everyone at Cambridge Junction.



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www.adversecamber.org



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