Study Guide

SONG OF THE NORTH

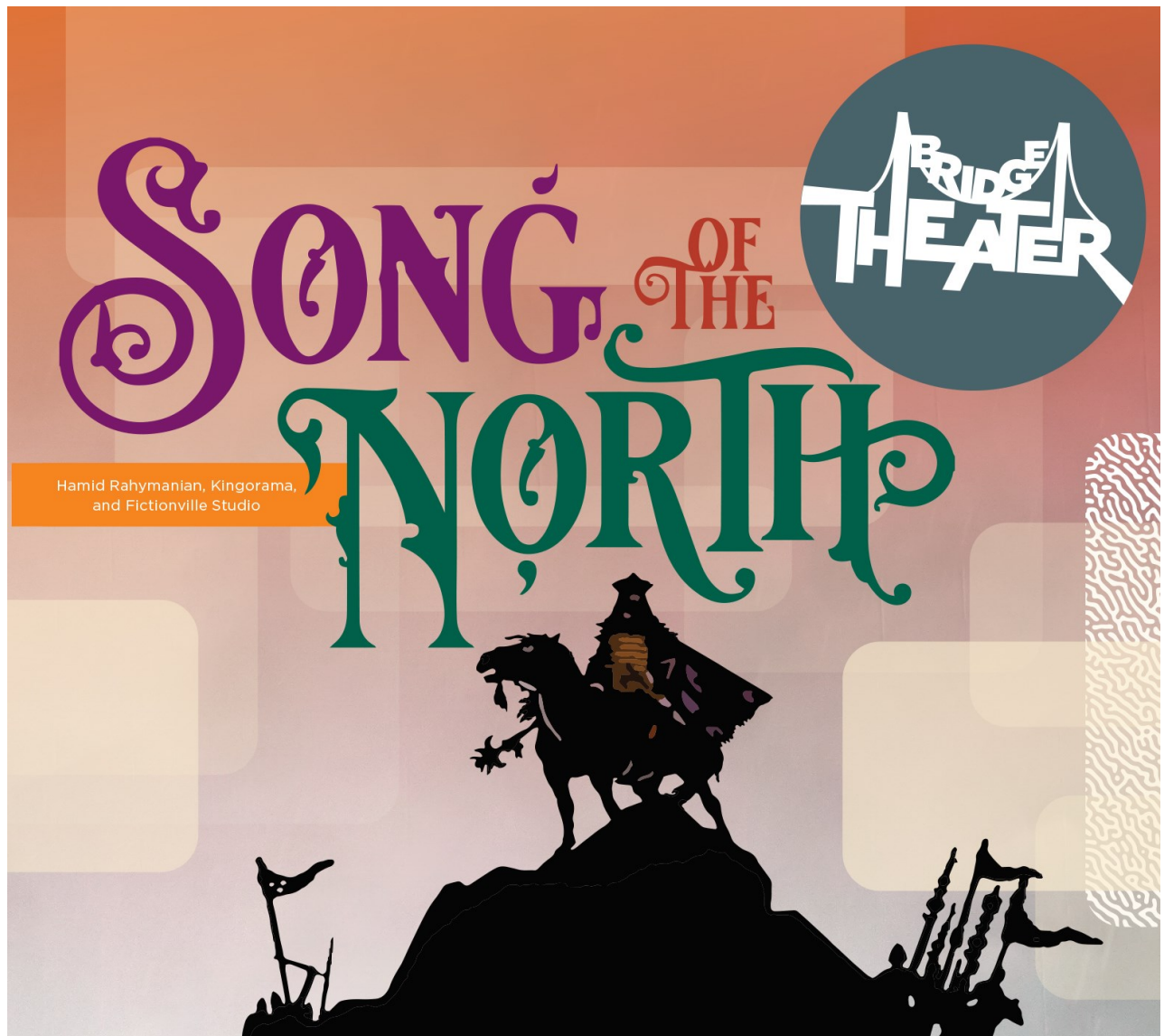Hamid Rahymanian, Kingorama, and Fictionville Studio

BRIDGE THEATER

Show Description

Song of the North is a large-scale, 80-minute multi-disciplinary live performance work by Hamid Rahmanian and collaborating visual and performing artists. The show employs shadow puppetry, animation, movement, an original music score by Ramin Torkian and voiced dialogue to interactively tell a tale adapted from the Shahnameh.

The Shahnameh is an ancient collection of myths from the Iranian plateau, a historical and cultural touchstone that is a national treasure in Iran. *Song of the North* continues Rahmanian's exploration of this significant epic, and expands the theatrical methods used in *Feathers of Fire,* his first award-winning multi-media work, to introduce audiences of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities to the valuable artistic, historical, and cultural contributions of Iran.

The production combines multidisciplinary modes of representation to tell the story of Manijeh, a heroine admired for her strength and determination, who helps prevent war between rival kingdoms. One of the most striking elements of this work is the use of over 300 handmade puppets in the play which are inspired by the visual culture of Iran and it's neighboring lands that evolved around the Shahnameh, with influences from Persian miniature paintings and etchings. The puppets also reference the once vibrant puppetry tradition of Iran while imbuing it with modern and international elements. The intricate puppets and seven actor-dancer-puppeteers interact and perform in front of stunning over 200 animated backgrounds and behind a large, 16X30 foot screen set up at the edge of a proscenium, on which the audience watches the entire show projected, immersing them in a live animated adventure.

Through the multi-sensory telling of this ancient myth and accompanying engagement programs, we aim to encourage audiences to feel a little less estranged from their neighbors and illuminate the values and similar experiences we all share.

We are taking this show to diverse cities, some of which may not be familiar with the art form and/or Iranian culture. We are collaborating with local institutions, creating outreach programs that include school performances for at risk youth, ESL learners, and kids with disabilities; workshops for children and adults in areas of dance, shadow puppetry and puppet making, artist talks with university students in theater, Persian arts and arts management; and talk backs with audiences on the process of creating the work.

As an American citizen, born in Iran, Rahmanian works to bridge gaps of understanding, and highlight shared ideals and values in the face of cultural vilification, and official discrimination. The source material of *Song of the North* is the Persian epic, the Shahmaneh, a beautiful, powerful, and accessible point of entry. We strongly believe that striving toward equity, diversity, and inclusion are hallmarks of a thriving and robust society. Our work advocates for voices that have been historically misrepresented through work that is accessible for patrons of all ages, cultural backgrounds, economic groups, and physical ability. We embrace artists of all backgrounds and are committed to telling stories that prompt conversation, inspire compassion, and promote empathy.

Show Roles

Created, Designed and Directed by Hamid Rahmanian
Producer: Melissa Hibbard

Script written by Hamid Rahmanian and Melissa Hibbard
Based of the love story of Bijan and Manijeh from the Shahnameh
Original Score written & orchestrated by Loga Ramin Torkian

Featuring Vocalist: Azam Ali

Ensemble: Sam Jay Gold, Harrison Greene, Jenny Hann, Esme Roszel,
Sarah Walsh, Clay Westman, and Christopher Williams

Voice Actors: Mark Thompson, Christina Calph, Richard Epcar, and Rose Nisker

Stage Manager: Zach Perez
Company Manager: Ray Dondero

Booking Agent: Laura Colby - Elsie Management

Musicians: Robab, Kamaan, Saz, Lafta, Guitar Viol, Programming & Keyboards: Loga Ramin Torkian
Vocals & Percussion: Azam Ali
Percussion: Pejman Hadadi
Violin: Molly Rogers
Cello: Mahsa Ghassemi
Kopuz & Kaval: Sinan Cem Eroglu
Piano: Sufi Rahmanian
Cello: Iman Torkian

Puppets:
Design: Saba Niknam, Hamid Rahmanian
Construction and Mechanics: Zach Broome, Esme Roszel
Puppet Construction: Katayoun Amir Aslani, Weiyi Chen, Ray Dondero, Parisa Harandi, Neda Izadi, Neda
Kazemifar, Negin Keyhanfar, Sonia Kim Shuhei Matsuyama, and Kevin Marinelli.

Background Animation and the technical support: Hoda Rami
Sound Mixing: Mehrnaz Mohabati
QLab Setup: Mo Talani
Fight Choreography: Rob Aronowitz
Script Consultants: Ahmad Sadri, Lauren Whitehead
Grant Writing: Alexandra Guglielminetti
Technical: Tyler Gothier

The Shahnameh

Shahnameh, the national epic of Greater Iran, is a masterpiece written by the renowned Persian poet Ferdowsi between 977 and 1010 CE. This epic poem is one of the longest in history, with 62 stories, 990 chapters, and some 50,000 rhyming couplets, making it more than three times the length of Homer's Iliad. It tells the story of the Persian Empire, blending both mythical and historical elements. Many regions influenced by Persian culture, including Iran, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Armenia, Dagestan, Georgia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, celebrate this national epic.

The Shahnameh holds great importance in Persian culture and language, symbolizing Iran's cultural and ethnic identity. Its timeless themes deeply resonate with different generations, recounting the rise and fall of powerful dynasties, the conflicts between kings and heroes, and the struggles against nature, destiny, and one's inner voice. These stories reflect both long-established traditions and modern realities.

The Shahnameh is a chronicle of kings, with specific sections dedicated to the crowning and demise of each monarch. It covers the reigns of fifty rulers. Their stories are commonly divided into three sections: the mythical age, the heroic age, and the historical age, telling the mythical and historical past of Iran from the world's creation until the Islamic conquest of Iran in the 7th century. Besides its significant literary value, the Shahnameh, written in almost pure Persian, was crucial for reviving the Persian language after the influence of Arabic.

Shadow Puppets
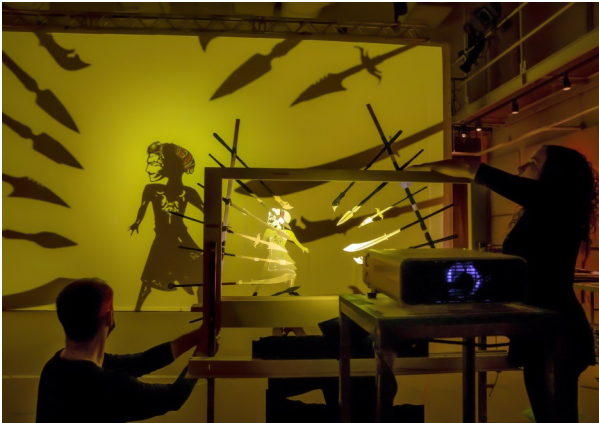
A shadow puppet is a flat, two-dimensional figure or character that is manipulated to create shaded images on a screen or other surfaces when illuminated from behind. These puppets are typically crafted from lightweight and semi-transparent materials such as leather, paper, or cloth, which allow the passage of light. Skilled puppeteers utilize various techniques to control these puppets and bring the characters to life within the shadows. In the production "Song of the North," some puppets are manipulated using hand movements, while others are worn like costumes.

Shadow puppets boast a long and diverse history that extends across several centuries and cultures. Tracing the exact origins of shadow puppetry can be challenging, but it is believed to have emerged in ancient China more than 2,000 years ago. Over time, this art form spread to different regions in Asia, and the Middle East, and eventually made its way to Europe.

"From the 10th to the 13th century, shadow theater was one of the most important genres of entertainment among people in Egypt, Iran, Syria, that area," says Rahmanian, creator of "Song of the North." Using paper silhouettes helped create a loophole of sorts for Muslim performers because, in early Islam, the depiction of one's face was not allowed. Throughout recent times, shadow plays have almost completely disappeared from Iran.

Supplemental Activities

Write Your Own Epic Poem

A couplet is when two lines of verse are connected by rhythm and rhyme and come one after the other. The Shahnameh, which was originally written in Early New Persian, has over 50,000 couplets, most of which are quite long. However, when translating the Shahnameh into English, many translators have chosen to use a more simple and natural writing style, known as prose, and they use the couplets to create a dramatic effect or as attention grabbers. Here are a few excerpts from Dick Davis' translation:

> "I'm Kaveh, and a blacksmith, sire," he said,
> And as he spoke his clenched fists struck his head.
> "It's you whom I accuse, you are the one
> Whose fire's destroyed all that I've ever done.
> A king then, or a monster? Which are you?
> Tell us, your majesty, which of the two?
> If you reign over seven kingdoms, why
> Must our fate be to suffer and to die?
> Acquit yourself then, let me weigh your worth,
> And let your words astonish all the earth;
> And when we've heard you out we'll see
> The evils that the world has done to me,
> And why it is my son's brains have to feed
> Your snakes' insatiable and monstrous greed

> Now like a lovely cypress tree she grew;
> Wisdom was hers, and royal glory too—
> Her wondrous beauty was beyond compare,
> Unrivaled in that land, or anywhere.

> Suppose there's someone who's been bitten by
> A poisonous snake, and he's about to die:
> What do you say, my lord, should happen to
> A man who has the antidote but who
> Insists on hoarding it, and will not give
> The bitten man the means to help him live?"

Now, think of a story you would like to tell. Maybe it's of a family member who did something great; maybe it's a simple lesson you learned when you were young; maybe it's a fictional character you have created. You might begin by immediately creating couplet lines with rhymes. Still, if that seems too challenging, you may start by writing your story in prose. Then, read through it and circle moments that speak to you, whether because of how they sound or what they say. Remember, in many cases, poetry is most impactful when it's listened to rather than read. So, reading your first draft out loud may help you find the most poetic elements.

In poetry, we focus on sound and rhythm. In this style, we'll focus on AABB rhyme structure with a 10-syllable meter.

Here is an example:

TRUSTARTS EDUCATION

PITTSBURGH CULTURAL TRUST

Study Guide developed by Cassidy Adkins

Supplemental Activities

Write Your Own Epic Poem cont.

Take the ideas you were most inspired by and craft them into ten-syllable lines, ensuring that each pair ends with words that rhyme. If you're struggling to fit your thoughts into the meter, use a thesaurus to find words with the same meaning but different numbers of syllables. Or use a rhyming dictionary if you get stuck coming up with your rhyming couplets.

Some poetry uses beautiful imagery and flowery language. Some poetry represents feelings in a simple and clear way. Both are important and valid forms of storytelling! Find which style works best for you.

Vocabulary List

Couplet - two lines of verse that follow one another and are connected by rhythm and rhyme.

Prose - a style that does not follow a structure of rhyme or meter.

Epic - a long poem narrating the deeds and adventures of heroic or legendary figures or the history of a nation.

Meter - the basic rhythmic structure of a verse or lines in verse.

Shadow Puppetry - an ancient form of storytelling and entertainment that uses flat articulated cut-out figures that are held between a source of light and a backdrop.

Pre & Post-Show Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between myths, legends, and history?

2. What is an epic story for your cultural history?

3. Can you think of other examples of shadow puppets or shadow plays you have seen in media?

4. What do you know about the history of Iran and other Persian cultures? Does this play teach you anything new about them?

5. Could these stories be relevant to any group of people, no matter where they are from? Why or why not?

The Rainbow Fish

Friday, February 23, 2024 — Grades PreK-3

Ronald K. Brown/Evidence - The Equality of Night and Day and Open Door

Friday, March 1, 2024 — Grades 6-12

Sacred Earth

Thursday, March 21, 2024 — Grades 5-12

Dog Man the Musical

Monday, April 15, 2024 — Grades 1-6

Made possible by

PNC

**TRUSTARTS
EDUCATION**
PITTSBURGH CULTURAL TRUST

Scan for more information

Professional Development Workshops

The Art of Up-Cycling

Saturday, March 9, 2024—for K-12 Educators

ACT 48 Credit Available

Dancing and Social Emotional Learning

Saturday, April 13, 2024—for PreK-2 Educators

ACT 48 and PQAS Credit Available

What is an Ally?

Saturday, May 11, 2024—for K-12 Educators

ACT 48 Credit Available

All workshops held in the

Trust Arts Education Center

805/807 Liberty Ave.

Light breakfast provided

Scan for more information

**TRUSTARTS
EDUCATION**
PITTSBURGH
CULTURAL
TRUST