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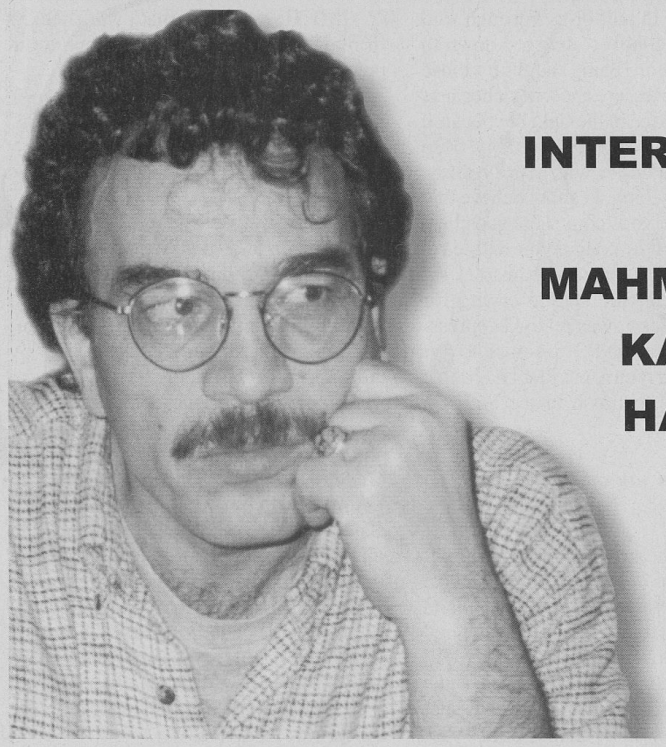

AN INTERVIEW WITH MAHMOOD KARIMI HAKAK

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 drawback. 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 women 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 feces 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 boarders, 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 believes 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 maintained 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.