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Inventing creation

Playwright, choreographer join to tell story of how humans came from gods

By TRESCA WEINSTEIN
Special to the Times Union

In the beginning, there was a story.

It was the original story, the tale of how human beings came forth from the gods. This version, one of hundreds told in different cultures and religions, was the creation story that playwright Mahmood Karimi-Hakak, a theater and film professor at Siena College, remembered from his youth in Iran.

It would become the basis for "Paydaayesh: A Creation Project," an ambitious, multilayered dance/theater production on stage tonight through Sunday in Siena's Foy Theatre.

There was just one little problem: The story Karimi-Hakak remembered didn't exist, as he discovered when he set out to research it for the piece.

"Apparently, somewhere in my young mind I had mixed a lot of stories together and created my own creation story," he said in an interview earlier this week.

He and his collaborators — including choreographer Ellen Sinopoli, sound designer Stephan Moore and Gary Maciag, who structured the text — decided that didn't matter. In fact, it was fitting.

"Creation is nothing but the result of the creativity of human beings," said Karimi-Hakak, who directed for off-Broadway theaters in New York City, including La MaMa and the Public Theater, before coming to Siena in 2002. His previous productions at the college include a postmodern version of Euripedes' "Iphigenia," staged in a giant canvas dome in 2004, and last year's contemporary retelling of Anton Chekhov's "The Seagull."

"We have had to tell the story of our own gods," he continued. "The (stories) all address the same need to create something we can worship, a way we can tell our own story."

Jim Dalton, a professor of religious studies at Siena, which is a Catholic and Franciscan college, has served as a consultant to the project since its inception, as a dialogue between the college's

"PAYDAAYESH"

- **When:** 8 p.m. tonight, Friday, Saturday; 2 p.m. Sunday
- **Where:** Siena College's Foy Theatre, 515 Loudon Road, Loudonville
- **Tickets:** $10; $8 seniors and students (free for Siena students and faculty)
- **Info:** 783-4242

CINDY SCHULTZ/TIMES UNION

MAHMOOD KARIMI-HAKAK used the creation story he heard in his youth in Iran as the basis for "Paydaayesh: A Creation Project."

Creative Arts and Religious Studies departments in 2002. An early 20-minute version of the piece was staged in fall 2003.

Dalton sees the project as a parallel to the creation story itself.

"Both are products of the human imagination," he said. "A work of art is a new reality, and a creation story is the story of how there came to be a new reality. ... An artistic work can be about creation and can be actually a vehicle of religious experience."

The hourlong piece, which premiered Wednesday, is rich with myth, symbolism and metaphor. The title is a Persian word that spans many meanings, including recovery, discovery, uncovering, creativity and creation, Karimi-Hakak said. The stage is in the shape of a three-spoked triskelion, an ancient symbol that appears in the Celtic, Greek and Hopi cultures, among others, and is associated with reincarnation and the cycles of the sun.

The six actors in the cast include five Siena students (Christopher Bopp, Kellyanne Farrell, Gina Graziano, Maeve McEneny, Marco Samaritoni and Stacey Tuttle) and a former dance student of Sinopoli's at the Sage Colleges, Erika Oswald. Portraying the cyclical nature of the creation story, they tell and retell the story of how the gods gave shape to demigods, who brought forth human beings, who then erected gods to give reason and purpose to their existence.

Except for Oswald, none of the cast members are trained dancers; most of them had never even taken a dance class before signing on. When rehearsals began in the second week of January, Sinopoli decided that rather than setting choreography on the performers, she would help them develop movement for the piece that arose from an understanding of the concepts, language and emotion in each section.

For example, to create choreography for a seduction scene in which the gods of light and dark merge, releasing the seed that becomes humankind, Sinopoli had the dancers find ways of connecting physically without holding hands.

"It became a very intricate kind of personal exploration and discovery," she said. "By looking at it differently, they came up with some extraordinary ways of moving."

For Moore, who worked with Karimi-Hakak on "Iphigenia" and is also the sound engineer for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, the goal was "to create a different world of sound for each of the three states the actors find themselves in," he said.

To give voice to the gods, the actors use prayer bowls and run their hands along 24-foot lengths of tension wire strung between two stands, creating majestic vibrating sounds. As demigods, they communicate by whirling and blowing into corrugated plastic tubes, which produce an eerie, ethereal hum. The score weaves together the actors' live instrumentation with layered recordings of their playing that Moore captured in rehearsal.

The audience will not hear the actors' voices until more than halfway into the piece, when the humans begin to discover language. Maciag, director of Siena's International Playwrights Competition, distilled the essence of Karimi-Hakak's story into an impressionistic collection of words, followed by a more linear retelling.

The unusual shape of the stage for "Paydaayesh" is complemented by inventive set elements. A vertical spandex tube becomes a tunnel between the worlds of light and dark. Three long swaths of spandex form a kind of womb or shell from which the humans emerge, and later serve as scrolls on which scribes use instruments of light to set down the creation story.

"The light allows us to record the story," Karimi-Hakak said, explaining the metaphor. "The light is the inspiration to look for ourselves."

The only thing missing at Monday evening's dress rehearsal was what Dalton referred to as the final collaborator: the audience.

"If the performance is successful," he said, "then the audience walks out with a new sense of what reality is about and thus the creative act carries out into the world beyond. The audience will take out of this the final creation."