



PHOTOS BY CINDY SCHULTZ/TIMES UNION

BY TIMOTHY CAHILL
STAFF WRITER

The scene is considered one of the fiercest moments in Greek tragedy: A mother has just learned her husband has plotted to sacrifice their daughter to aid his country. In a fury, the woman, Clytemnestra, prepares to murder her man, the great general Agamemnon.

"I have dissembled much before this moment to suit my purpose," she declares. "Now I feel no shame to speak the truth. For how else could someone show hatred to hated men who have made a pretense of love ...?"

For director Mahmood Karimi-Hakak, that searing moment resonates far beyond his production of "Iphigenia." The Siena College theater professor, who is staging the play with student actors at the college this weekend, knows what it means to bear humiliation and finally speak truth. More than most Americans ever will, the Iranian exile has felt the cathartic power of freedom.

Before he was forced to flee Tehran in 1999 with his wife and infant twin daughters, Karimi-Hakak endured government censure, religious thuggery and death threats. Escaping the oppression of the fundamentalist Muslim regime, the 55-year-old director, poet and translator eventually made his way to the Capital Region in September 2002. He has settled into his new

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▲ **"IPHEGENIA"** at Siena College in Loudonville is staged in the round, with audience members perched on the perimeter watching the action.



▲ **DIRECTOR** Mahmood Karimi-Hakak on the set of "Iphigenia." The production touches on issues of power and patriotism.

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life, and with this weekend's production introduces the area to his avant-garde and intellectually courageous style of theater.

New translation

Karimi-Hakak worked with Siena classics professor Michael Sham on a new translation of the tragedy by Euripides. In relating the story of the sacrifice of Iphigenia by Agamemnon, the play examines the psychology of power and the corrosive effect of patriotism built on aggression. This staging is presented in the round under a large translucent dome, with audience members sitting on stools and cushions around the set. Video clips and music create an atmosphere that ebbs and flows between Athens in 404 B.C. and the present day.

Intercut into the original play are passages from other classical sources, including the Greek dramatist Aeschylus (from whom the scene with Clytemnestra is taken) and the historian Thucydides.

Both the abstract staging and the reworking of the text are designed to steer the production toward a single theme: "Violence has never solved anything," says Karimi-Hakak. "War will not bring peace. We can't kill in order to save."

Experience talks

A witness to both the street violence of the 1979 Iranian revolution and the psychological coercion of the mullahs and their operatives, the director speaks from stark experience. But the play comments upon all forms of government violence, evoking as well this country's current foray into Iraq.

In a speech that, with a couple of name changes, might have been directed at President Bush, Menelaus chides his brother Agamemnon: "Don't turn away from the truth. ... You were so eager to lead the Greeks to Troy, though you tried not to give that impression; your desire was fierce."

"I believe it is my duty to educate people, to awaken them," says Karimi-Hakak. "I believe art has a mission to educate."

It was precisely this consciousness-raising mission that led Karimi-Hakak to return to Iran in 1993 after living in the United States for 17 years. Except for brief sojourns in Europe, he had lived in this country for 17 years, studying the-



PLAYWRIGHT Michael Sham, left, and director Mahmood Karimi-Hakak on the set.

EXILE TRAGEDY

"IPHEGENIA: A CONTEMPORARY EVENT"

- **Where:** Foy Theatre, Siena College, Route 9, Loudonville
- **When:** 8 tonight and Saturday; 2 p.m. Sunday
- **Admission:** \$10; seating is limited
- **Info:** 783-4242

ater with many of the seminal figures of 1960s avant-garde drama, such as Jerzy Grotowski, Joseph Chaikin and Richard Schechner.

Standard screed

The academic was likely only an appointment or two away from a university job that would have supported him for life when he received a research grant to travel to Iran in 1992. In the course of meeting with students there, he found himself scolding a class of 20-somethings for being intellectually lazy. It was a more or less standard screed by an elder to the younger generation, the sort of thing that leaves most young people rolling their eyes and saying, whether in English or Farsi, "what-ever."

In this instance, however, a young woman rose from the back of the class and faced the speaker down. "I cannot believe you have the nerve to come here and chastise us," Karimi-Hakak recalls her saying. "Your generation created this revolution ... and as soon as they realized it was not what they had

expected, they left, leaving my generation to deal with the aftermath of what they had started."

"Her words pierced my heart," Karimi-Hakak wrote in an account of his experiences in Iran that was published in the academic journal *The Drama Review*. "... I promised her, the other students and myself that I would return. The next year I made good on my promise."

Mission impossible

But the director quickly found that making independent theater in Iran was an impossible mission. His essay, "Exiled to Freedom: A Memoir of Censorship in Iran," is a harrowing chronicle of lies, suppression, intimidation and arrest at the hands of political officials and religious goons.

After some 125 play proposals were rejected by the Iranian bureaucracy, and despite censorship that American theaters can scarcely imagine, Karimi-Hakak and a troupe of actors managed to stage

DRAMA: Professor sees art as a vehicle for change



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MAEVE McENENY plays the title character, who pays the highest price for her father's lust for power in the Siena production of "Iphigenia."

Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

This seemingly benign tale of lovers and sprites was attacked and eventually closed by the government, and landed its director in a labyrinth of sham legal hearings conducted just steps away from rooms of interrogation and torture. The tale ends with Karimi-Hakak and his family receiving threats against their lives, and their exodus across the Turkish border back to America.

"Iranians have tremendous strength in resisting and living with the struggle against tyranny," says Karimi-Hakak. "We have a history of torture. It has not begun with this regime; it will not end with this regime. It has thickened our skin."

Oppression, he says, has a way of giving the courageous more courage.

"The thicker my skin became, the stronger I felt in my opposition to the way artistic freedom is censored in Iran."

Art for change

As an artist and exile, the director seeks to educate Americans about his native culture, and "pre-

sent to the youth in this country the idea that art can still be a vehicle for change."

Avant-garde theater is more than an alternative way of staging plays; it's a different way of conceiving truth. Karimi-Hakak's one-act "Iphigenia" takes place inside the mind of its heroine in the split-second between the time she sees the executioner's axe and it severs her throat. The girl both relives the past and sees into the future, glimpsing events from the Crusades to the 9/11 attacks and "weapons of mass destruction."

"Theater is what happens in the minds of the audience after they have seen the play and are on their way home," says Karimi-Hakak. "It doesn't matter if the audience gets it right away. The process of art becomes to inject an idea, plant a seed in the minds of individuals that will grow as they grow."

While his play may implicitly criticize Washington as well as

Tehran, Karimi-Hakak calls the United States "an ideal society."

"America is a society in which people can grow on their own trial and energy," he says. "Whatever small limitations it has, they are things a strong mind and strong personality can overcome."

And while he allows that he and other Iranian exiles are "in limbo — emotionally and intellectually we're all waiting to go back," Karimi-Hakak says he is inclined to stay in upstate New York. It suits him and his wife Leila, an actress, and the couple's 6-year-old daughters.

"This is a quiet corner, and it's close to the cultural center of the world, New York City," he observes. "My children are very happy here, and they are very safe."

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT