

Zara Houshmand

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Zara Houshmand is an Iranian-American writer, translator, and theatre artist whose work opens borders between different cultures. Born in San Francisco, she was raised in the Philippines and educated in the UK, where she received her BA in English from London University in 1975.

Theatre and Performing Arts

Recent commissions as a librettist working in collaboration with composer Sahba Aminikia include *The Language of the Birds*, an hour-long choral piece adapted from Attar's 12th century Sufi poem, commissioned by 836M and performed by the San Francisco Girls Chorus, with multimedia by John Sanborn (2024); the chamber opera *Phoenix* for Seattle's Music of Remembrance (2024); and *Shams*, commissioned by the Verdigris Ensemble of Dallas (2023). Both *Shams* and *The Language of the Birds* included spoken word performance by Zara, integrated in the musical production.

Her script for *Drupadi*, an adaptation from the Mahabharata commissioned by San Francisco's Shadowlight Theater for a coproduction with Gamelan Sekar Jaya, was in production in 2020 but suspended due to the pandemic.

Her earlier experience in theatre ranges from writing, dramaturgy, and translation, to directing and designing. Beginning in Los Angeles in the early 1980s, she studied with the celebrated Iranian director and playwright, Bijan Mofid, translating and designing his productions, and worked as literary manager at Theatre of NOTE in Los Angeles and as a reader for the Berkeley Repertory Theatre. Her first original play, *The Future Ain't What It Used To Be*, was produced at the Burbage Theatre in Los Angeles in 1986. She returned to the Burbage in 1989 to direct Stephen Lowe's *Tibetan Inroads* with an all-Asian cast, which launched her research in traditional Tibetan theatre. She was a founding member of Chaksam-Pa, the Tibetan dance and opera company, and served as executive director for three years. In 1991, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco commissioned a nationally touring production of the Tibetan opera *Sukyi Nima*, for which she wrote the English voice-over. Her interest in traditional Asian theatre continued with five years' study of Balinese shadow puppetry and led to the writing, with Larry Reed, of *In Xanadu*, a modern shadow play presented at the Henson International Festival of Puppetry at the Public Theatre in New York (1994) and the Spoleto Festival (1997).

Representing contemporary Iranian theatre for American audiences, she directed a bilingual Farsi/English production of her translation of Bijan Mofid's children's play, *The Butterfly*, for Darvag Theatre in San Francisco in 1995. She also translated and designed a production of Bahram Beyzai's *Eighth Voyage of Sindbad* for Darvag Theatre, directed Torange Yeghiazarian's *Abaga* for Golden Thread Productions, and lectured on bilingual theatre at the 2002 Kyoto Biennale.

Poetry

Zara's poems have been published in the anthologies *A World Between* (George Braziller, 1999), *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora* (University of Arkansas Press, 2006), *The Forbidden: Poems from Iran and its Exiles*, (Michigan State University Press, 2012), *Essential Voices: Poetry of Iran and Its Diaspora* (Green Linden Press, 2022), and in the journals *Evergreen*, *Global South*, *Atlanta Review*, *Borderlands Texas Poetry Review*, *caesura*, *Persian Book Review*, *Split This Rock*, *Three Quarks Daily*, *Texas Observer*, and *West Coast Line*.

Most recently she was commissioned by the Minneapolis Institute of Art to write a poem in lieu of a critical essay for the catalogue on a forthcoming exhibition of Anish Kapoor's work.

Literary Translation

Zara's translations of Bijan Mofid's plays were awarded the first commissioning grant from the National Theatre Translation Fund in 1991. She was a contributing editor for *Words Without Borders* from its inception in 2003, and her translations of contemporary Persian poetry and short stories are included in five anthologies.

Her translations of Rumi's rubaiyat first appeared daily online in *Iranian.com* in 2000, and were published as *Moon and Sun: A Selection of the Rubaiyat of Molana Jalal al-Din Rumi* (Amrevan Books, 2020). An earlier publication of the same translations (*Ghaht-e Khorshid*, Morvarid Publications, Tehran, 2006) is used as a textbook for translation studies at Tehran University.

New Media

Living in Iran before the 1979 revolution, Zara worked on multimedia programs for museums, trade fairs, and the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults. Returning to the U.S. in 1980, she worked as a writer and instructional designer in high-tech industries, where she was involved in the earliest development of interactive media. Noteworthy projects included *Brothers* (1993), an interactive video for the National Task Force on AIDS Prevention, which won five awards. As Executive Producer for Worlds, Inc. (1994-1997), she managed the creative development of virtual reality and social media technologies for the Internet for clients such as MGM and Disney Online.

This experience led her in 2000, in collaboration with Tamiko Thiel, to create a virtual reality art installation, *Beyond Manzanar*, which explores parallels between the Japanese-American internment during World War II and more recent experiences of Iranian-Americans. The installation has been widely exhibited in Europe, Japan, and the US, and was acquired for the permanent collection of the San Jose Museum of Art. More information is available at www.mission-base.com/manzanar.

Collaborative Writing and Editing

Applying her experience in dramatic writing and deep collaboration, Zara developed a uniquely empathetic and creative approach to collaborative memoir. Examples include *A Mirror Garden*, with Iranian artist Monir Farmanfarmanian (Alfred A. Knopf, 2007) and *Running Toward Mystery*, with the Venerable Tenzin Priyadarshi (Random House, 2020). More information is available on request.

For over two decades, Zara served as Publications Director and editor for the Mind and Life Institute, which hosted a continuing dialogue between the Dalai Lama, Buddhist scholars, and leading Western scientists. She was responsible for the development of nine academic and trade books covering the conferences, working closely with authors Daniel Goleman, Francisco Varela, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Richard Davidson, and others.

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