

Zara Houshmand

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Zara Houshmand is an Iranian American writer and interdisciplinary artist whose work bridges different cultures and art forms, including theatre, new media, and literary translation. Born in San Francisco, she was raised in the Philippines, educated in the UK, where she earned her BA Honours in English from London University (1975), and worked in Iran until the revolution. She now lives in Barcelona, Spain.

Theater and Performing Arts

Recent commissions as a librettist working in collaboration with composer Sahba Aminikia include scripts for the *Flying Carpet Festival* (2025) a children's circus-theatre based in Mardin, Turkiye, and serving refugee children living in conflict zones; *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) and using Zara's translations from Rumi.

Other recent collaborations include *Drupadi*, an adaptation from the Mahabharata commissioned by Larry Reed's Shadowlight Theater, and writing and dramaturgy for dance theatre productions with Jia Wu, Emiko Susilo, and Shahrzad Khorsandi.

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

In addition to her translations of Bijan Mofid's plays, awarded the first commissioning grant from the National Theatre Translation Fund in 1991, Zara has translated contemporary Iranian poetry and short stories published in the anthologies *Strange Times, My Dear: The PEN Anthology of Contemporary Iranian Literature* (Arcade, 2005), *Literature from the Axis of Evil* (The New Press, 2006), *Contemporary Voices of the Eastern World* (W.W. Norton, 2007), and *Words Without Borders: The World Through the Eyes of Writers* (Anchor, 2007). She was a contributing editor for *Words Without Borders*, the online journal of literature in translation, from its inception in 2003.

Her translations of Rumi's rubaiyat first appeared daily online in *Iranian.com* in 2000, and were published as *Moon and Sun* (Amreva 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 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, is the subject of much writing in new media critical theory, and was acquired for the permanent collections of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the San Jose Museum of Art.

Collaborative Writing and Editing

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.

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 Farmanfarmaian (Alfred A. Knopf, 2007) and *Running Toward Mystery*, with the Venerable Tenzin Priyadarshi (Random House, 2020). More information is available on request.