

ART BEYOND BORDERS

The third **EDINBURGH IRANIAN FESTIVAL** promises a re-examination of the culture, history and art of a much-misunderstood country

INTERVIEW: BRAM E. GIEBEN

FROM 1 to 16 February, the third Edinburgh Iranian Festival comes to the capital to celebrate the history, culture, language and art of Iran. Often, the portrayal of Iran in the media focuses on the negative – policies on censorship and its political situation are the subjects most often addressed, but the country's rich cultural heritage, not to mention its thriving contemporary cultural life – both in Iran itself, and in the expatriate community – are often passed over.

The Edinburgh Iranian Festival seeks to redress this balance, and to expose the expat Iranian community in Scotland, and Scottish audiences, to a wide array of the nation's culture, history and art. Sara Kheradmand set up the first festival in 2008, after founding the Edinburgh University Persian Society, and the first season ran in 2009. "Doing something like this – which is about culture, about giving something back to both the Scottish and the Iranian community – is something we are all passionate about," she says.

This year's festival is dedicated to the Persian poet Ferdowsi, who wrote Iran's 'national epic,' *The Shahnameh*. It celebrated its 1000th anniversary in 2010. "There is a long-standing tradition of people – usually men – acting out the stories from *The Shahnameh*. People will gather around to listen," says Kheradmand. Xanthe Gresham will be performing an English-language version of some tales from the epic: "We've never seen anyone doing this before," says Kheradmand. "She has taken the translations and applied her own twists." There is also a lecture from Professor Ali Ansari about the relationship between *The Shahnameh* and modern Iran.

While talking about life and culture in modern Iran, both Kheradmand and her colleagues are keen to dispel some myths. Haleh Jamali, the curator of the festival's visual arts strand and a featured artist, says: "You rarely see programmes on Iran's culture or history, so we would like to focus on that." The film strand engages directly with life in present-day Iran, and the hardships that are entailed: "*Modest Reception* touches upon life in villages; *Orange Suits* is about street-sweepers," says Kheradmand. The films are intimate: "You get to know their lives." The lecture programme explores contemporary life in Iran from different perspectives: "We have a lecture about tribal life in

Iran with Professor Borbor – a completely different lifestyle than you would encounter in Tehran," she says. "The photographer James McGachie's lecture is about his travels in Iran – he presents an outsider's perspective."

The art exhibition is based around the theme of 'borders,' and presents work from international artists alongside contemporary work from Iran, and Iranian expats. "We were interested to see how people across cultures and nations would respond to the theme," says Jamali. "Some are about geographical borders, some are about more abstract things – the borders between the real and unreal." Given that the rest of the programme has a strong focus on Iranian history and culture, why does the *Borders* event not focus exclusively on contemporary Iranian art? "In the final selection, we have some Iranian artists, but the majority are not Iranian," says Jamali. "Sending art from Iran can be quite difficult and expensive, so that was a factor. There are some traces in the Iranian pieces, some references to their cultural identity. But there aren't specific references to Iran. [Their work] can be seen as part of a Middle Eastern art tradition, rather than a specifically Iranian one."

According to Jamali, the Iranian contemporary art scene is alive and kicking: "In the past three years or so, performance and video art have become quite strong in Iran," she says. She "can see lots of very high art coming from Iran in the future." Perhaps at future festivals, more of this work can be exhibited. Nonetheless, this year's show still has some fantastic Iranian art on display: "There are Iranian artists living in Iran and expatriate artists in the exhibition, so it is a chance to compare their work," Jamali says.

The festival's music strand sees five performances from contemporary Iranian bands. "In the Iranian population right now, there are a significant number of people who are under 30. These youngsters, through today's media and technology, are very much exposed to Western music, and this has an effect," says Kheradmand. "You get fusions of jazz, pop, hip-hop, lots of diverse musical styles. Many of these bands use traditional instruments."

Roxana Vilik, whose band GOL are on this year's bill, use the *def* and *santour*, blending them with jazz and electronica. "The group Baran have mixed it in another way – they have Indian and Spanish

influences, as well as Iranian and Kurdish," says Kheradmand. "Radio Tehran are simply a rock band who happen to sing in Farsi. The more traditional bands, you might hear on Iranian radio channels..."

"But who listens to those radio stations? That's the interesting question," says Vilik, who is also working on a contemporary dance and video art piece inspired by traditional Iranian tile and metalwork. For Vilik, the internet has changed everything – when GOL were featured on BBC Persia, they had a flood of requests from Iranian fans asking for more of their music, which has never been commercially released in Iran, but thrives illicitly in the backstreet music shops and underground recording studios which service the young music fans of the country.

"Art and culture always carries on. It finds a way"

SARA KHERADMAND, EIF CURATOR

There is "virtually no copyright in Iran," according to Vilik. "I've recorded in Tehran, and the musicians there will have a better understanding of Western music, and Eastern music, than we do here. They are so culturally and musically literate." Much of the music made and enjoyed in Iran has to be discovered via unofficial channels, like internet radio. "Women singing is still forbidden – you can sing as a chorus, but not solo," says Vilik. "If you have a record with a lead singer who is female, that will be released underground."

Another important event in the festival calendar is an exhibition at the National Museum of Scotland, curated by Friederike Voigt, the Museum's Senior Curator of the Middle East and South Asia collections. It includes metal works and ceramics, and will show "contemporary art in the context of historical pieces." Voigt says: "We want to show some of the principles applied in the decorative systems; their inner nature, which still inform today. Pieces by renowned artists such as Parviz Tanavoli or Khosrow Hossainzadeh were acquired and are now on permanent display." For Voigt, the exhibition is an opportunity to "explore how artists draw

on their own heritage."

One such exploration is Roxana Vilik's dance piece, which uses the patterns of Iranian metalwork and ceramic tiles as "a sonic and choreographic score." Vilik explains: "Showing figurative human forms is a complex issue in Islamic culture. But the patterns in the tiles and metalwork are about movement and repetition. I wanted to ask how this could be used by bodies, without coming out of the territory of traditional Iranian art and values." This kind of cultural dialogue between the past and the present, the historical and the contemporary, is what the festival is all about.

Speaking frankly about censorship in Iran, the festival's curators are loath to categorise the effects of Iran's attitudes towards, and laws about art as entirely negative. "In certain ways, censorship creates creativity," says Kheradmand. "Art and culture always carries on. It finds a way, within the limits." For Jamali, "it depends on the artist." She says that living and working in Iran "helped quite a lot," because she "managed to concentrate on something which [she] could present."

Vilik meanwhile is wary of romanticising art produced under censorious regimes: "Take Václav Havel or Milan Kundera – undeniably, their lives were made more difficult by censorship. I think that outside Iran, there is a market for art, music and films which idealise that censorship, and the artists' work produced in reaction to it."

With workshops on calligraphy, Farsi, Iranian cooking and a whole host of other events, and a gala performance from one of the festival's long-term supporters, Irish-Iranian comedian Patrick Monahan, 2013's Edinburgh Iranian Festival promises to educate, inform and entertain, all in the name of reaching a better understanding of the life and history of one of the most maligned and misrepresented cultures in the modern world.

"We have always used the festival as a platform to bring together artists, musicians, lecturers and other people together," says Kheradmand. "Once you understand another culture, and it stops being alien to you, you're not afraid of it. You see the people. You see the culture."

THE EDINBURGH IRANIAN FESTIVAL RUNS FROM 1-16 FEB
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PROGRAMME AT THE FESTIVAL'S WEBSITE:
WWW.EDIRANFEST.CO.UK