


Seattle's first Iranian theater company is ready for its first live show

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Playwright Naghmeh Samini, co-founder of Seda Iranian Theatre Ensemble. Her play “The Forgotten History of Mastaneh,” which she is also directing, will be the company’s first live production. (Noushin Jafari)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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Naghmeh Samini’s latest work couldn’t be more timely.

The Seattle playwright began writing “The Forgotten History of Mastaneh” in response to news about violence against women in Iran and around the world. One day in May 2022 she became overwhelmed by these stories and spent the entire day in tears, then she began to write.

“Always, to write the first draft takes me two or three months. On this magic day, I finished the first draft after seven or eight hours,” she said. When she showed it to her colleagues, they all agreed it was the perfect choice for the inaugural production of [Seda Iranian Theatre Ensemble](#), Seattle’s first Iranian theater company, co-founded in 2019 by Samini and Parmida Ziaei, a local set designer, dancer, and choreographer who, like Samini, is from Iran.

Set in a girls’ high school in 1987 Iran, and told from the point of view of Mastaneh, one of the students, the play follows the struggles and secrets of three young people against the background of the Iran-Iraq war. The 90-minute, one-act play will be performed in Farsi with English subtitles at Taproot Theatre in Seattle’s Greenwood neighborhood Feb. 10-12.

While Samini was editing subsequent drafts of the play, Mahsa Amini, a student arrested under Iran’s hijab law, died in police custody in Tehran, sparking ongoing

protests.

“As Iranians, we are all very under the influence of the news from Iran. In each rewriting, I tried to relate the play more to the happenings in Iran which are so heartbreaking and also so hopeful,” said Samini.

“When people who are not from Iran hear the news coming out of Iran, they may think this is a new thing. But all of this is a culmination of 40 years of oppression and a constant cycle of violence,” added Ziaei, whose [work in dance](#) is also tied to the protests in Iran. “We want to reflect and acknowledge that because it’s part of all our identities. So, in this play right now there is an opportunity to express a mutual feeling for all of us. The story is very relatable to a lot of the Iranian community because they have experienced it, especially women.”

Samini wrote “The Forgotten History of Mastaneh” in Farsi, the language in which Seda’s members and their local Iranian audience are most comfortable.

“But we really wanted to invite non-Iranian audiences to come and join us and see this production,” said Samini. She worked closely with local Iranian American Bookda Gheisar for the subtitle translation.

“We always wanted to have this bilingual aspect to the company. We are giving opportunities to the Iranians and creating community. At the same time, we’re trying to keep it approachable for the non-Iranian audience. Hearing a play in a different language can be a new experience,” said Ziaei.

Compared to Los Angeles or Toronto, Washington state’s Iranian American community is small — [about 15,000 people](#) — and relatively dispersed. According to Ziaei, local Iranians are more likely to work in tech than in theater. Ziaei came to the U.S. to study architecture and theater at UC Berkeley before moving to Seattle in 2016. Samini was already established as a playwright in Iran and internationally, but had recently moved to Seattle when a mutual friend introduced them to each other in December 2019. They were both looking for community and immediately began to think about forming a theater company together.

“Theater in nature is community building. It’s telling stories and it’s so approachable, especially for people who have so much to say but never had the opportunity or place to say it. Seda means voice; it’s giving people a platform,” said Ziaei.

Neither of them had experience running a theater company, but Ziaei is the resident set designer at Macha Theatre Works, a Seattle nonprofit theater company with a mission to support women in theater. They met with Amy Poisson, Macha's producing artistic director, who saw something new and valuable in Seda.

"The style of storytelling is so different than what you see every day in Seattle," Poisson said. Together they established Seda as a department of Macha — organizationally the same as an education department. That leaves Seda free to focus on artistic development while learning what Poisson calls "the nuts and bolts of producing" from within the Macha organization.

"Because Naghmeh is an educator as well, we decided to start with some classes to gauge interest," said Ziaei. They found few theater professionals in the local Iranian American community, but many people with an interest in theater. During the pandemic, they offered online classes and workshops and made short films, including "The Play of Life and Death," commissioned by a local nonprofit to educate the Farsi-speaking community about COVID.

"The Forgotten History of Mastaneh" is their first live production. Samini directs the Iranian cast. Ziaei is the production manager and set designer. Advance sales are strong, with a fourth performance already added to the play's one-weekend run.

"Daily in any arts community somebody decides to start a theater company. These two have actually done it," said Poisson.

Ziaei invites audiences to remember that behind the play is a community dealing with many challenges, and in the face of these challenges, "they choose to create art. Theater is a powerful tool of activism and protest. Supporting art from communities that are going through difficult times is a way of supporting those communities everywhere."

"The Forgotten History of Mastaneh"

Feb. 10-12; Taproot Theatre Isaac Studio, 212 N. 85th St, Seattle; \$15-\$100; 206-781-9707, sedatheatre.com

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