



Dancing with Hafez



Writing is difficult when I have said what I needed to say through dance. My hope is that these brief, introductory words provide context and insight into the inspiration behind the show.

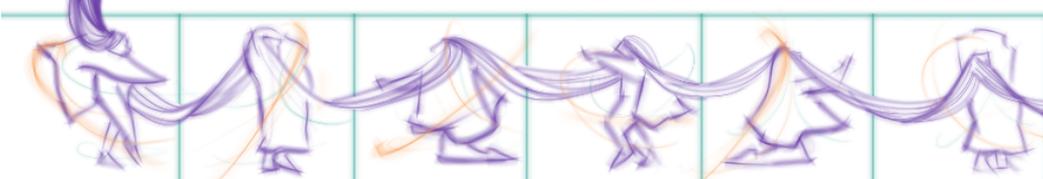
Dancing with Hafez is a love letter to Iranian women and features pieces I developed over the last five years during my master's degree program at Saint Mary's College. But the roots of the work go back decades to my upbringing in Iran and my experiences as a woman and dancer under a patriarchal, repressive regime where the simple act of dancing is illegal. As such, the show echoes the voices of the Woman Life Freedom revolution that erupted in 2022 in Iran, which continues to this day, and which led to the death and torture of thousands at the hands of the brutal regime.

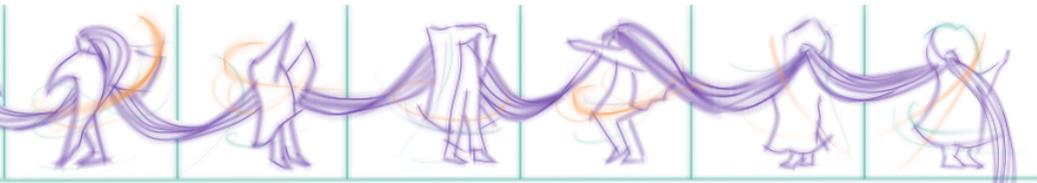
At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, I began closely studying the poetry of the legendary 14th century Iranian poet Hafez via video-chat with my Maman, who was in Iran. Every day at 8AM Pacific Standard Time, we would read a Hafez poem. Maman, a Hafez scholar and expert, would interpret it, and we'd discuss its hidden meanings. This ritual continues to this day, and we've since moved on to other great Iranian poets such as Rumi, Ferdosi, Khayyam, and Parvin Etesami. I was immediately taken by the movement and dance in each verse of Hafez's poetry.

دل چو پرگار به هر سو دورانی می‌کرد
و اندر آن دایره سرگشته پابرجا بود

*Like a compass, the heart spun in every direction
And in that circle, it chose to remain bewildered*

It was as if he was a dancer and had concealed his body-mind in each precisely chosen word. Through this daily ritual, I became so immersed in the poetry of Hafez that in a dream he visited me. In my half-conscious haze and through tears, I wrote in my journal: "Hafez, you've been with me all along. You're in my heart and soul. I now understand the endless tears that can create rivers, where trees are watered." In this dream, I was a part of the tapestry with Mahsa, Nika, Hadis, Sarina, Khodanoor. We were Simorgh and beautiful in our brokenness. I wrote in my journal: "The beauty of being broken, the beauty of fragments united to create the divine."





Deeply moved by these experiences, I decided to share them through dance and music. I worked closely with my dance mentor, Suhaila Salimpour, to stage the pieces you will see tonight and further develop their emotional content and perspectives. She has the creative gift of genius and with one word, glance, or gesture, she understands what I am trying to say and elevates my movements to another level. I am forever grateful to her for sweeping me up in her arms when I was at my lowest creatively. She had faith in my vision when I did not, and inspired me to renew my vows with art.

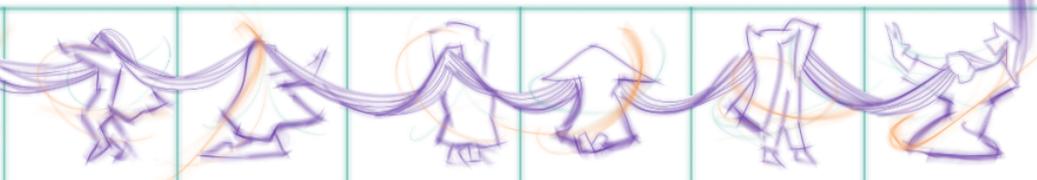
Given the social media footage of our fallen heroes in Iran, who paid the ultimate price for standing up to injustice and fighting for basic human rights, I wanted to create a piece that took inspiration from their movements and honored their lives. The idea was for each dancer to study the movements of a fallen hero from video footage and create a choreography based on their movement patterns and their emotional perspectives. To realize this vision, I reached out to other Iranian dancers and musicians in the Bay Area to co-create this piece. The result was “Garden of Grapes, Garden of Plums” (باغ انگوری باغ الوچه), the second piece in the show.

Each piece is titled after a verse or segment of a poem from a famous Iranian poet – Forugh Farrokhzad, Fereydoon Moshiri, and Ahmad Shamlou. These are poems I read growing up in Iran. These verses have the theme of “garden” both as a nod to the importance of gardens in Iranian architecture and design, and because gardens are a metaphor for this world where one enters through one route and exits the next – as Hafez says:

گل عزیز است غنیمت شمریدش صحبت
که به باغ آمد از این راه و از آن خواهد شد

I don't have proof of this but I know that these famous poets must have danced with Hafez and moved with his poetry the way we do today, centuries later and in exile. We will continue dancing with Hafez to unite our shattered selves.

For freedom (برای آزادی),
Parya



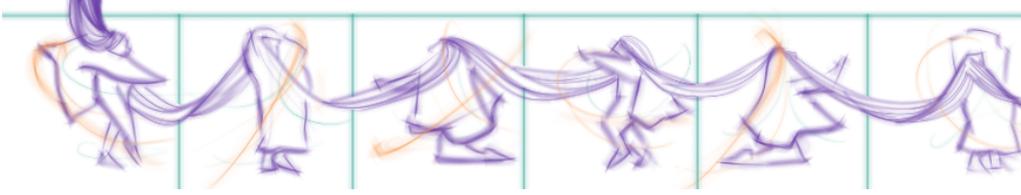


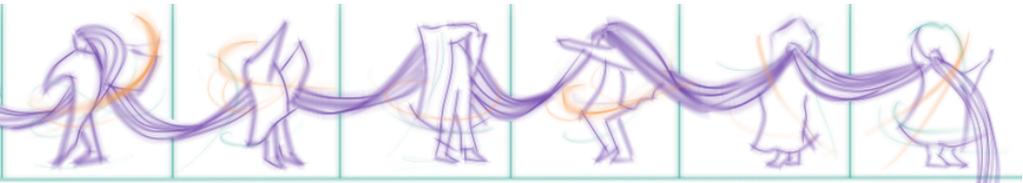
From Suhaila.....

There exists a unique sense of despair in the voice of immigrants; a feeling of guilt and helplessness when your body resides in one country, but your heart and soul remain tethered to another. I remember vividly this sensation from my childhood, watching my father and other family members grapple with the gift and burden of immigrating to a new land. Their goal was clear: to fight relentlessly and bring the rest of our family here, sparing them the suffering they endured back home.

One morning, an unexplainable feeling compelled me to call Parya. As she answered the phone, I heard that voice of despair so clearly, I felt a chill run down my spine. I immediately sensed her distress. "How are you?" I asked. Her response pierced my heart, "Not good. I think I need to go to Iran. I can't just sit here." I understood her suffering all too well—the agony that gnaws at you relentlessly. It had become inconceivable that we might forget the courageous warriors who stood up against such a violent and oppressive regime. "It can't be for nothing," we agreed.

Mentoring Parya in creating "Dancing With Hafez", a representation of resilience and love for our culture, was a healing experience for both of us. It alleviated our loneliness, allowing us to process our grief through art and movement—an unparalleled form of therapy. It helped us make sense of the incomprehensible circumstances surrounding us. This kind of work can only be done when there is shared trust and love. While Parya's MFA project was the starting point of what has become the show, the true heart of this performance, for me, lies in the mornings when Parya and her mother shared poetry over a phone call during the pandemic. A lifeline to each other, they would converse daily, selecting one poem to recite and analyze, attempting to make sense of not only the poetry but also a much broader reflection of the world.

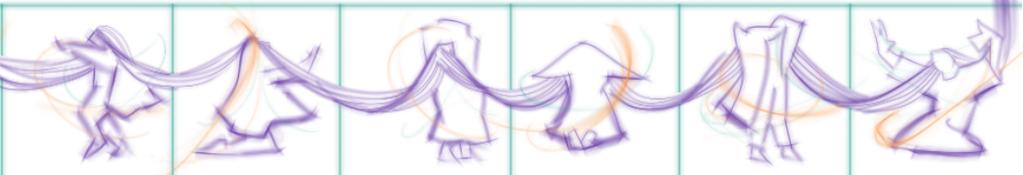


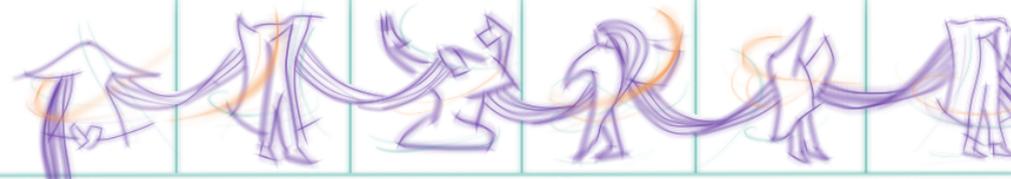


The birth of "Dancing With Hafez" is just the beginning of what I believe will be a series of beautiful collaborations with Iranian artists worldwide, celebrating life and fighting for the legacy of those who have protested and fought for freedom. They are never forgotten—in our minds, hearts, and in the graceful movements that symbolize our ongoing fight for women, life, and freedom. We dance because we can!



Photo: Lydia Daniller





1- Garden of Mirrors

آینه ای برابر آینه ات می گذارم

I place a mirror in front of your mirror

Poetry: Ahmad Shamlou

Music: Inspired by "Zarb e Reng" by Hossein Tehrani from the Album "Tombak" performed by Elaheh

Dancers: Parya Saberi, Patti Kjonaas, Donna Simon, Janelle Rodriguez, Sabriye Tekbilek, Mela Amaiya

Lighting Design: Harry Rubeck

2- Garden of Grapes, Garden of Plums

یه شب مهتاب
ماه می آد تو خواب
منو می بره
کوچه به کوچه
باغ انگوری
باغ آلوچه

One moonlit night

The moon comes into my dream

Takes me away

Alley to alley

A grape garden

A plum garden

Poetry: Ahmad Shamlou

Music: "Ye Shab-e-Mahtab" by By Farhad Mehrad performed by Azadeh Farpour, Ava Nazar, Elaheh, Clarissa Bitar

Vision for the piece: Parya Saberi

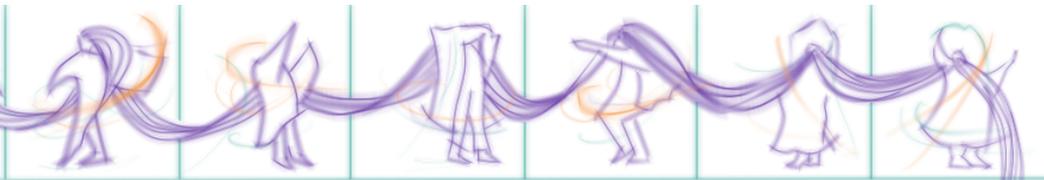
Choreographers for individual Sections: Aliah Najmabadi, Shahrzad Khorsandi, Aisan Hoss

Dancers: Shahrzad Khorsandi, Aisan Hoss, Aliah Najmabadi

Lighting Design: Harry Rubeck

Brief note: This piece is dedicated to the women and men who fought for our freedom, especially during the Woman Life Freedom uprising, and lost their lives. In this piece, we honor three heroes: Khodanour Lajai, Hadis Najafi, and Nika Shakarami.





3- Garden of 100 Memories

در نهانخانه جانم گل یاد تو درخشید
باغ صد خاطره خندید
عطر صد خاطره پیچید

*In the secret place of my soul
The flower of your memory shined
The garden of a hundred memories laughed
The fragrance of a hundred memories swirled*

Poetry: Fereydoon Moshiri

Music: "Sazo Avaz" from the album "Raz-e No" by Hamavayan Ensemble

Dancers: Parya Saberi, Rachel Duff, Kayla Hummel

Lighting Design: Harry Rubeck

4- Moonlight Garden

بستر خویش از حریری نرم چون مهتاب کردم
تا تو چون گل های شب در باغ مهتابم شکفتی

*I made my bed of soft silk like the moonlight
Until you bloomed like night flowers in my moonlight garden*

Poetry: Simin Behbahani

Music: "Laili Jaan" by Sima Bina performed by Azadeh Farpour,

Ava Nazar, Clarissa Bitar, Farin Foroudi, Elaheh

Dancer: Parya Saberi, Rachel Duff, Kayla Hummel, Mela Amayi

Lighting Design: Harry Rubeck and Danielle Ferguson

5- Garden of the Nightingale

گل پرپر، کجا گیرم سراغت صدای گریه می آید ز باغت
صدای گریه می آید شب و روز که می سوزد دل بلبل ز داغت

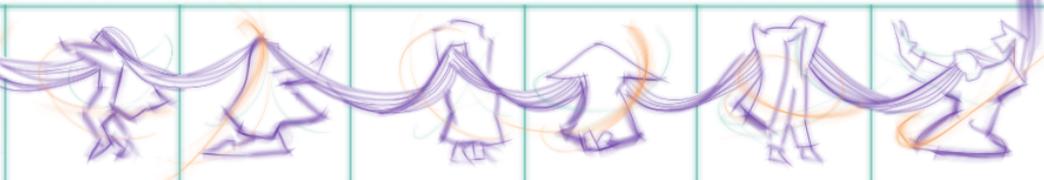
*Oh withered flower, where can I find you, the sound of weeping is heard
from your garden
There is a sound of weeping day and night which burns your
nightingale's heart*

Poetry: Hushang Ebtehaj

Music: Azadeh Farpour, Ava Nazar, Clarissa Bitar, Elaheh

Dancer: Suhaila Salimpour

Lighting Design: Harry Rubeck and Danielle Ferguson





6- I Feel Sorry for the Garden

کسی نمیخواهد
باور کند که باغچه دارد میمیرد
که قلب باغچه در زیر آفتاب ورم کرده است
که ذهن باغچه دارد آرام آرام
از خاطرات سبز تهی می شود

*No one wants to believe
That the garden is dying
That the heart of the garden is inflamed underneath the sun
That the mind of the garden is slowly
Becoming empty from green memories*

Poetry: Forugh Farrokhzad

Music: "Mahtaab" by Hossein Alizadeh overlaid with Parya's sound-recordings from her mother praying, pastures in Northern Iran (by Damavand Mountain), and the Grand Bazaar of Tehran

Photo credit: White Wednesdays and the artists of the Woman Life Freedom revolution

Dancer: Parya Saberi

Lighting Design: Danielle Ferguson

Piano solo interlude

"Bidad" by Ava Nazar; Composed by: Masoud Ebrahimi

7- I Plant My Hands in the Garden

دستهایم را در باغچه میکارم
سبز خواهم شد، میدانم، میدانم، میدانم
و پرستوها در گودی انگشتان جوهریم
تخم خواهند گذاشت

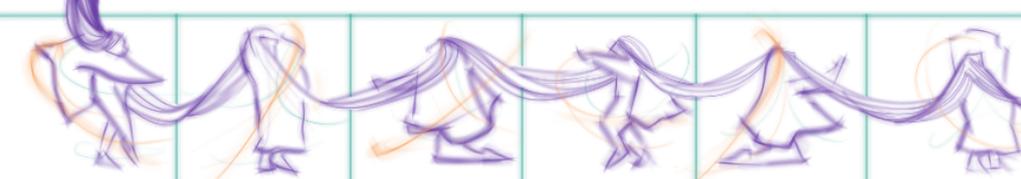
*I plant my hands in the garden
I will become green, I know, I know, I know
And the swallows will lay eggs
In the hollows of my inked fingers*

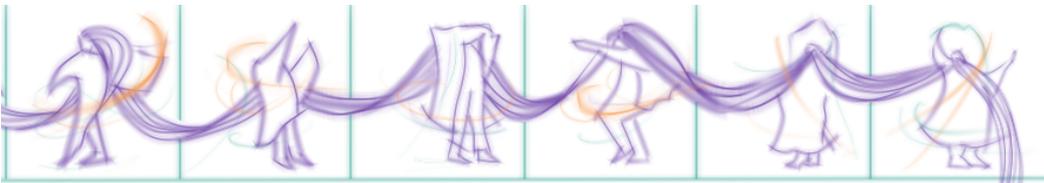
Poetry: Forugh Farrokhzad

Music: "Nawai - Torbate Djaam" from the album "Nawai: Iranian Folk Music" by Sima Bina

Dancers: Parya Saberi, Rachel Duff, Kayla Hummel, Janelle Rodriguez, Sabriye Tekbilek, Mela Amaiya

Lighting Design: Harry Rubeck



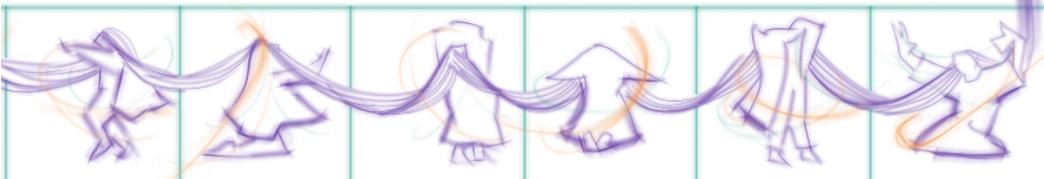


Direction, Production, and Choreography:

Parya Saberi (@parya_dance) is a performer, choreographer, and instructor of dance. She first started Iranian dancing at the age of 6 with Farzaneh Kaboli in Iran and later joined the Anahita Dance Company under the direction of Nahid Kabiri. Performances ranged from classical Iranian to folkloric dances from various regions of Iran. After moving to the US, Parya joined the New York style Mambo dance company, Melaza, and performed at numerous events such as the Los Angeles, New York, and Boston Salsa Congresses. After moving to San Francisco, Parya initiated belly dance classes with Suhaila Salimpour and fell in love with this dance form and the Salimpour Format. She toured extensively in Europe and the US with the Suhaila Dance Company. In addition to her full-time work as a faculty member at the University of California, San Francisco, Parya completed an MFA in Dance at Saint Mary's College of California. In October 2022, Parya created the group WomanLifeFreedom at UCSF (@womanlifefreedom_UCSF) with her colleagues.

Direction and Artistic Mentorship:

Suhaila Salimpour (@suhailasalimpour) is a second-generation Middle Eastern (Kurdish, Sicilian, and Greek) American belly dancer Suhaila Salimpour who is best known not only for creating the first certification program in belly dance, but also for the global influence of her specific format on belly dance performance and instruction. Just like her mother, Jamila Salimpour, the Suhaila Salimpour Format has inspired thousands of dancers around the world both technically and culturally. Suhaila has choreographed three full-length theatrical stage shows, was nominated for an Isadora Duncan Award, and recorded over 23 albums featuring some of the most profound Arabic musicians of our time. Suhaila's work has been recognized by leaders in other dance forms for its depth and innovation, preserving the essence of belly dance while bringing it into the 21st century with grace and integrity.





Dance:

Rachel Duff (@rduffphoto)

Rachel has been dancing for most of her life in some capacity, starting in childhood with ballet and modern. She has studied under Suhaila Salimpour since 2005, performing and touring worldwide as part of her dance company. She considers herself a lifelong student in all forms of dance, and is honored to take part in bringing focus to Iranian women's experience through Dancing with Hafez.

Kayla Hummel (@kaymariedance)

Eight years ago, Kayla moved to the San Francisco Bay Area from the East Coast to study dance. She has been studying the Salimpour format since 2015 and recently began working with an aerial arts studio and performance theater. She is excited to be joining the dancers in this show for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic.

Mela Amaiya (@mela_amaiya)

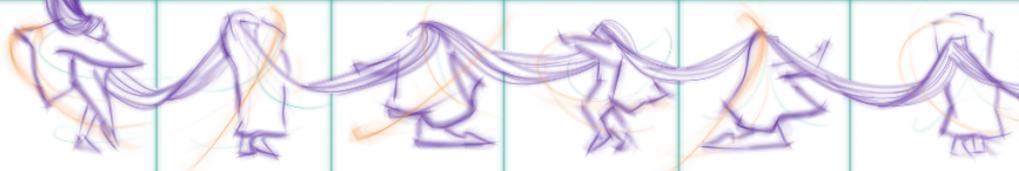
Mela Amaiya is passionate about dance and women's empowerment, and is honored to be part of Dancing with Hafez. She's grateful to study with Belly Dance with Suhaila Salimpour, along with Cuban and other dance forms. She believes dance is soul medicine.

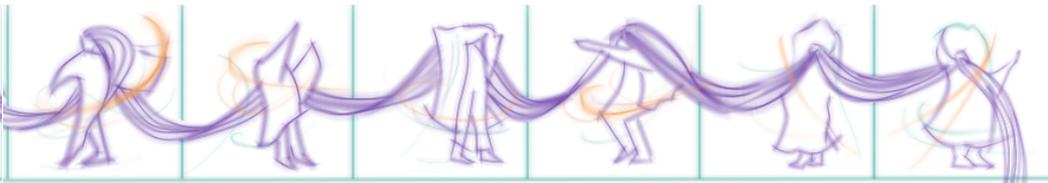
Janelle Rodriguez (@janelledance)

Janelle Rodriguez has studied dance since the age of 5 and started her belly dance training in 1998. In 2001, she started her dance training with the Suhaila Salimpour and is now a licensed instructor for the Salimpour School format and also owns and operates her own dance and Pilates studio in Santa Cruz, CA. Janelle is honored to be part of this important movement for freedom and Iranian women's rights.

Sabriye Tekbilek (@sabriyeh.tekbilek)

Sabriye was immersed in Flamenco, Ballet and Middle Eastern Dance from an early age. She went on to complete the Salimpour Institute Certification program and has toured extensively as a dance performer and instructor in the Middle East, Europe, North and South America, and Asia.





Shahrzad Khorsandi (@shahrzad_khorsandi)

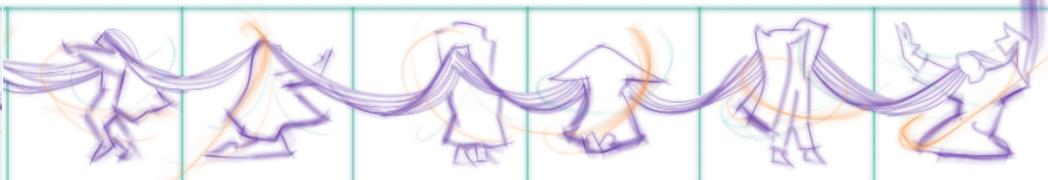
Shahrzad Khorsandi is an Iranian-born dancer and choreographer residing in California. She studied Modern Dance and Performance Art at CalArts, and holds a BA in Dance, and an MA in Creative Arts from SFSU. Shahrzad has been a faculty member at several colleges in the Bay Area and travels globally to teach and perform Iranian dance. She has drawn upon her experience in Iranian culture, and her formal dance training, to create a dance vocabulary and pedagogy for Iranian dance as a means of emotional expression. She is the artistic director of Shahrzad Dance Company, the author of the book, *The Art of Persian Dance*, and a member of an international research team, studying the effects of dance on the brain.

Aisan Hoss (@aisanhoss_and_dancers)

Aisan Hoss is a contemporary dancer and choreographer from Tehran, Iran. She started studying and performing Iranian dances at the age of twelve. She moved to London to pursue dance at the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Contemporary Dance and later pursued an MFA in Dance at Mills College in Oakland, California. Aisan aims to give voice to the quietest elements of her culture through choreography. After her residency at Ballet Afsaneh, as the company's Assistant Artistic Director, choreographer, and dancer. Aisan founded her own dance company, Aisan Hoss and Dancers.

Aliah Najmabadi (@samaa_arts)

As a first-generation Iranian American woman born in the diaspora, Aliah continually grapples with her identity as traditional dance artist. Through choreography, performance, and research she is a passionate advocate of intangible cultural heritage with a focus on the traditional performing arts of Central Asia and Iran. Aliah holds a Master's in Performance from the University of London and dual Bachelor's in World Arts and Cultures and Iranian Studies from UCLA. It is with humility and honor that she dances in the memory of those we have lost.





Music:

Azadeh Farpour (@afarpour) – Vocals

Azadeh trained in traditional vocal Iranian music with Pari Maleki and Master Mohsen Keramati in Iran, and has been performing concerts in Iran and US since 2010. She performed in the play "Tarabnameh" which is a traditional musical written and directed by Bahram Beyzaie in 2016 and 2017 at Stanford University. She sang in the Let Her Sing program in support of women in Iran in 2019.

Ava Nazar (@avanazar) – Keyboard

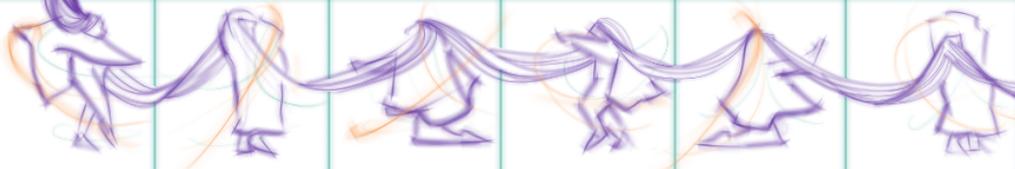
Iranian-American pianist Ava Nazar is a graduate of the Manhattan School of music and the Juilliard School where she holds her B.M. and M.M. in Piano Performance. Her recent performances include those at notable venues such as the United Nations, Merkin Hall, National Sawdust, American Museum of Natural History, and Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, as well as the Aspen Music Festival, and the Music Academy of the West where she served as a collaborative piano fellow.

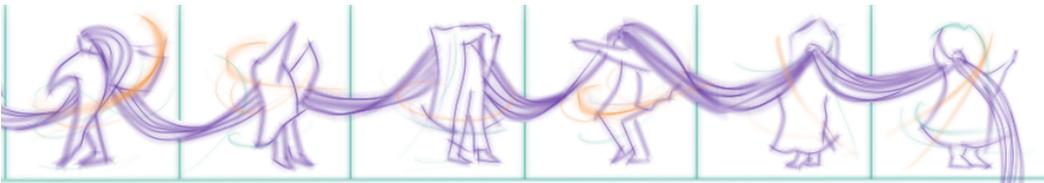
Clarissa Bitar (@ClarissaBitar) – Oud

Clarissa is an award-winning Palestinian oud musician and composer with a degree in Ethnomusicology from UC Santa Barbara. They have incorporated oud with a multitude of genres ranging from R&B to Pop to Hip Hop and Rap with features on Netflix, radio, film, and exhibits around the world. Clarissa has a passion for teaching and sharing knowledge on Arab music, as well as performing and hopes to continue to carve out spaces for oud in the diaspora.

Elaheh – Tombak

Elaheh is a Water Engineer at California Water Services Company. Her music journey started at age 10 when she started learning Tombak from Farshad, and continued receiving lessons from Arash Farhangfar. Through the years she has performed different solo and group performances at different schools such as University of Tehran, Michigan State University, University of Michigan, and Stanford University. She continues her music adventure through Bay Area Persian Music Ensemble.





Farin Foroudi – Daf

Farin is a clinical pharmacist. She started learning Daf from maestro Masood Habibi in 1993. She was a member of Dalahoo Daf Ensemble and carried out several solo and performances at Vahdat concert hall with Dalahoo Ensemble and Tehran Symphony Orchestra. Farin is currently working as a full time pharmacist and also teaches Daf lessons. She has joined Bay Area Persian Music Ensemble in 2021.

Stage Management, Production, and Design:

Chi Chi Okonmah (@c2orhythmandarts) – Stage Management
Stage & Production Manager, Business Arts Consultant, Entrepreneur, Dancer, Art-ivist, and more. Chi Chi Okonmah lives and breathes her passion!

Danielle Ferguson (@dfergusonLD) – Stage Design and Production Management

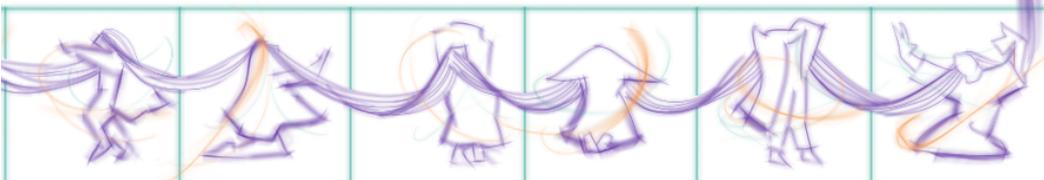
Lighting Designer, Head Electrician, Lightning Technician, Dance Production Manager, Photographer, and more. Living her best life behind the scenes of productions throughout the Bay Area.

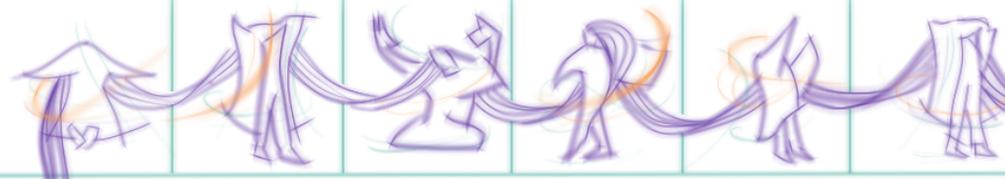
Kimiya Salehi Fadardi (@KimiyaSF) – Visual Art

Kimiya is a San Francisco-based architect and artist who grew up in Wales, UK and later moved to Mashhad, Iran, where she became a social rights activist.

Matin Nasiriha (@matin.nasiriha) – Costume Design & Construction

Matin is a multi-disciplinary artist based in San Francisco. Matin has a unique blend of skills such as illustration design, acting, costume design for dance, music, and theater performances. With her own authentic creativity and dedication, Matin weaves captivating narratives through her illustrations, brings characters to life with her costume designs, and enchants audiences with her compelling performances.





Harry Rubeck – Lighting Design and Technical Direction

Harry Rubeck has been honored to have worked with many artists and choreographers in the Bay Area over the last 25 years. He has been resident Lighting Designer and Technical Director at Dance Mission Theater since 2005. He has also worked in New York and numerous venues in Europe. He holds a degree in Theater from Hampshire College.

Parousha Zand – Backstage Management

Parousha Zand is an Iranian San Franciscan nurse, mother and Khaleh who has been dancing her whole life. Prior to focusing on her career and family she danced with Ballet Afsaneh and Arenas Dance Company.

David Gaylord (@toosourfilms) – Videography

David Gaylord is a photographer, cinematographer, and artist. He has completed over 2000 pieces of creative work in the last 35 years. As a filmmaker David's work has been shown worldwide and received over 20 festival laurels.

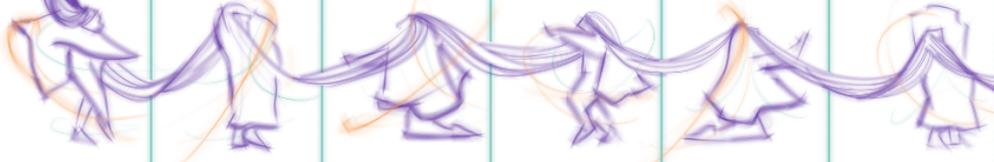
Hillary Goidell (@hillarygoidell) – Photography

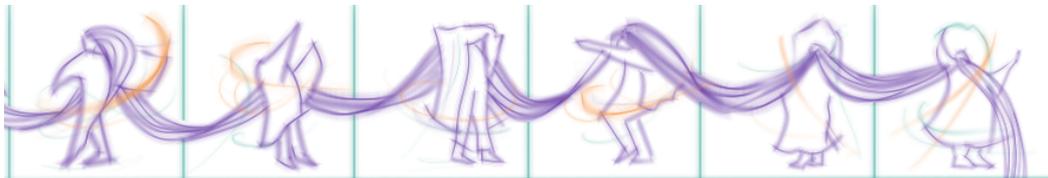
Hillary Goidell is a Bay Area-based photographer interested in process, movement and multi-sensorial ways of witnessing. She collaborates with choreographers to document their creative process and interprets dance for audio description. She also works with larger processes like end of life, using photography as a tool for healing and imprinting experience.

Jill Randall (@jill.h.randall) – Marketing

Jill Randall (she/her) is a Bay Area dance artist. She is the Artistic Director of Shawl-Anderson Dance Center, Adjunct Instructor at Saint Mary's College of California, and a freelance publicist and writer.

Backstage crew: Nikolai Caswell, Pouné Saberi, Patti Kjonaas, Donna Simon, Brittney Banaei, Leo Adriazola, Matt Larsen, Courtney Struthers, Sierra Carroll





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Special thanks to: Nikolai Caswell, Cathy Davalos, Rogelio Lopez, Pouné Saberi, Shirin Haeri (aka Maman), my family (aka Fam joon), Dance Mission staff, Shawl Anderson Dance Center staff

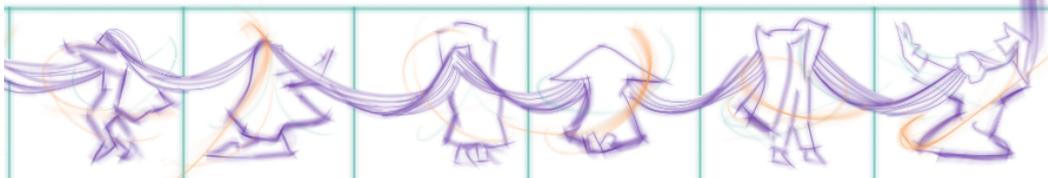




Photo: Lydia Daniller