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Singing is a Fight: An interview with Mahsa Vahdat on the role of the arts in social change

Shaudi Vahdat · August 7, 2015



Photo by Tahmineh Monzavi.

Our company is currently working with the plays of Bertolt Brecht, who wrote that the purpose of his theatre was to not only arouse moral objections to societal injustice, but also to discover means for its elimination. In his view, the role of the artist was essential in moving society forward: "It is precisely theatre, art, and literature which have to form the "ideological superstructure" for a solid, practical rearrangement of our age's way of life" (from Brecht's "The Epic Theatre And Its Difficulties").

To explore this concept further, and get an idea for what it might mean to someone in today's society, I reached out to Mahsa Vahdat, a singer living in Tehran, Iran (also: my cousin). Due to strict culture laws in Iran, it's illegal for Mahsa to publicly perform or sell her albums there, but since 1995 she has performed as an independent artist in concerts and festivals in Asia, Europe, the US, and Africa, often collaborating with American, European, and other Iranian musicians. In 2004, she participated in the album Lullabies from the Axis of Evil (an album which has got to be one of the best responses to something said in a State of the Union address ever). She is also an award-winning ambassador of the Freemuse Organization, an independent international organization that advocates freedom of expression for musicians and composers worldwide.

I started off by asking Mahsa what she sees as the role of the artist in combatting oppression and injustice.

MV: An oppressive regime tries to limit all kinds of freedom and dictates the mind and even heart. Because in the spirit of true art there is a freedom and liberation, it can connect with humans in a free way. I cannot imagine if we did not have the great poets like Hafez, Rumi and Khayyam. These poets, who are also philosophers and thinkers, posed [a dissident vision of] the true value of human life while they were in a society full of restrictions and limitations.

The presence of influential artists gives power to the people and dissidents and also strengthens a kind of unity.

SV: After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Ayatollah decreed that women could no longer be allowed to sing solo in public, unless the audience was made exclusively of women. Do you remember your initial reactions to hearing that news?



MV: When the revolution happened I was 5 years old, so in a way I was grew up with this limitation and obstacles. When I started to learn Persian vocal arts I just started because I loved it, I was not very much aware of restriction and censorship. I just loved to sing and loved to learn and study singing...Later, little by little I decided to choose it as my career, regardless of limitations, and started to do some private concerts, and then I understood what a difficult and challenging path I chose. But I had a hope for change and I was so determined, and this determination became

stronger and stronger in my life, and the limitations made me even more motivated. Many times I became sorrowful in life, [wondering] why there is this censorship and why I cannot perform in my own country, but I could handle all these sorrows, and I decided to dedicate my life to this. Then singing was not just singing for me, it became also a fight.

SV: Has there been progress made since this initial decree? Have you been experiencing any more artistic freedom in recent years?

MV: There were some years that it was little better but just very minor. Iran had and has a lot of political ups and downs and in these ups and downs the main victim was art. An oppressive regime is afraid of everything. Such a regime understands the power of art and its influence, so when the fear increases then the pressure on art and music also increases, especially on females.

SV: From your interviews, and from the fact that you continue to perform Iranian music, I get the sense that you are optimistic that a progressive change in the laws of Iran will happen. Can you talk a little bit about this optimism that positive change is possible, and the extent to which it motivates your work?

MV: I am always hopeful...I believe that I and some of other female singers have made many changes in Iran. Maybe we could not change the rule, but we could prove that artists can pass the borders that oppressive regimes put in front of them. I believe that I motivated many

other females to learn and keep the treasure of vocal art without any bright landscape in front of them, just as I was so inspired by the other female singers. I know that it is difficult and a big struggle, but I really believe in further changes.

SV: Your work is radical in many ways: it could be said that you essentially break the law every time you practice your profession. I'm wondering how much this thought is consciously on your mind as you work.

MV: When I create music I feel free because I want to be loyal to the deepest part of my emotion, so I create regardless of any feeling of being censored.

In my daily life I have to follow some rules that I don't believe in. For example when I go outside of my home in the street in Iran I have to have a scarf for [covering] my hair; I don't believe in this but I have to do it because if not I will be arrested. But in creating my art I have tried to teach myself that I should be completely free. Freedom and independence for my creativity is so important that no power and restriction can take it from me.

It is a big struggle for an artist but I am so determined to have this freedom.

SV: The members of our theatre company, The Horse in Motion, believe that the arts have a vital role to play in asking questions, proposing answers and facilitating the community building essential to addressing issues of social justice, peace and

equality. We are also privileged to be making art in a country with relative freedom of expression. Is there any wisdom you would share or anything you would want to say to emerging artists like us?

MV: I think in our world now art has a big role in the issues that you mentioned. I have been involved with many dialogue-based projects, and I think art can create a kind of relationship between people in the world that is based on dignity and respect while politics mostly separate people from each other. Especially now we see that religious, racial and other kinds of antagonism are rising in the world, so the role of art is extremely important to connect people in a very simple way. All of us are human.

Our songs and music and expressions about joy, sorrow, and hope are similar and this is reflected in our art. Through art we can be so close to each other, respect each other and inspire each other. It can contribute to peace and justice.



Mahsa Vahdat's upcoming project is an acapella album recorded in various locations worldwide, including Istanbul, Oslo, Wroclaw, South of France and others, with texts from historic and contemporary poets. She is also working on an album with some of her female Iranian vocal students. Find out more at <http://www.mahsavahdat.com/>



Photo by Danielle Barnum

Shaudi Vahdat is a founding company member with The Horse in Motion and actor and music director for BrechtFest. If she had free time, she would spend it taking long nature walks and mastering the art of French cooking.