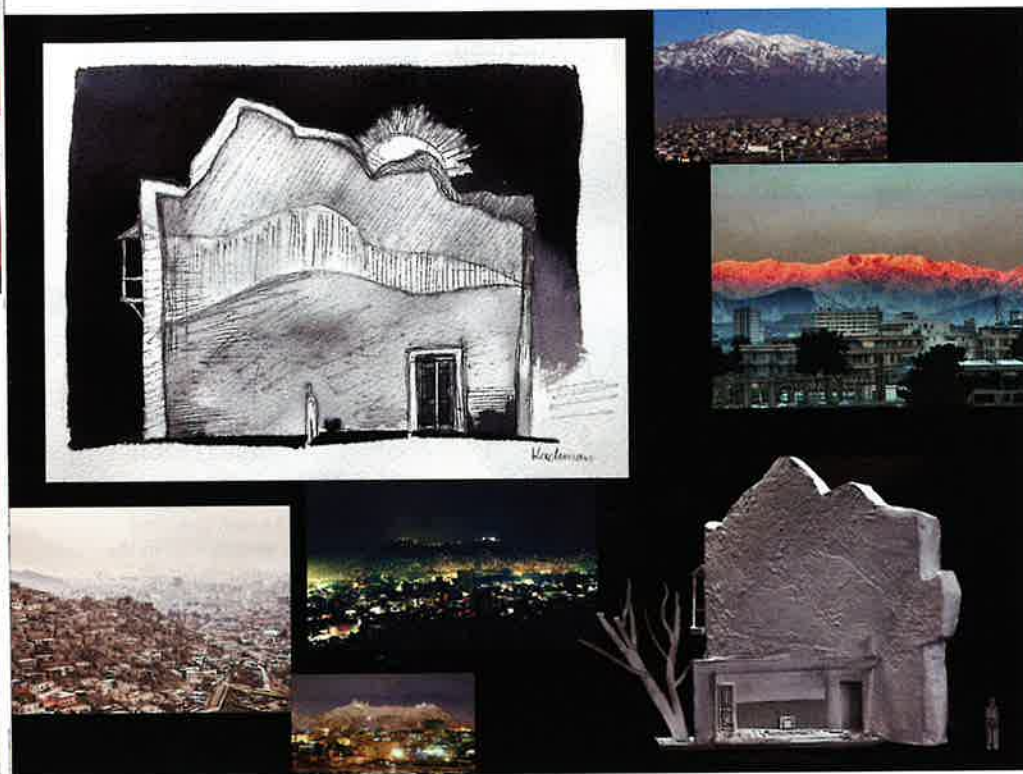


An Informed Narrative.

A Thousand Splendid Suns opens on February 25 at Seattle Opera.



► **THIS MONTH**, Seattle Opera presents the world premiere of Sheila Silver and Stephen Kitsakos's opera *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, based on Khaled Hosseini's novel about the friendship between two Afghan women during the Soviet-Afghan War and the first Taliban regime. Directing the production in her opera debut is Roya Sadat, the first Afghan woman in the post-Taliban era to direct a feature film (*Three Dots*, 2003).

Composer Silver first read *A Thousand Splendid Suns* more than a decade ago. "For me, the story is about Mariam and Laila, who, through the power of love and friendship, survive or transcend victimhood. I thought this would make an incredible opera, but it's a multigenerational story with many different characters. It seemed too complicated,"

says Silver. "After rereading the book, I discussed it with Stephen, who was instrumental in adapting the novel for the stage."

After receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2013, Silver traveled to North India to study Hindustani music, which has had a significant influence on the development of Afghanistan's classical traditions. "I was introduced to the different ragas, each with its own spiritual or life context, like the 'love' raga," says Silver, who has since returned to India several times. "These inspired different musical choices from what I would have made just writing tonal music." When Silver returned to the U.S., she began working on the score, incorporating the principles of Hindustani classical music she had learned, including traditional instruments in the orchestra—the bansuri, a side-blown flute, and the tabla, a pair of twin drums. "I want the audience to feel that they're in the world of the story," she says.

The opera was developed through several workshops with American Opera Project and support from Opera America, the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation and an NEA development grant. Humaira Ghilzai, an Afghan cultural consultant who worked on the 2022 Broadway stage adaptation of Hosseini's *Kite Runner*, was integral to the process. "My

Design images by
Misha Kachman
for *A Thousand
Splendid Suns*

work is about bringing cultural authenticity to a project,” Ghilzai wrote by e-mail, “weighing in on a script or libretto draft, advising a director and creative team on the world of a production, or working with actors to help them craft believable character portrayals with body language and backstories.” Ghilzai worked with Silver and Kitsakos on the language and storytelling and encouraged the inclusion of the *tabla* in the orchestrations. “This is a historic moment,” wrote Ghilzai. “It is very powerful to see explicitly Afghan stories told in respectful, authentic and nuanced ways.”

A Thousand Splendid Suns was commissioned by former Seattle Opera general director Aidan Lang; current general director Christina Scheppelmann continued to move the piece forward after he left. “I was very determined to bring on a female Afghan stage or film director,” says Scheppelmann. “The female perspective is important to give an authentic point of view of



From left: director Roya Sadat at work with composer Sheila Silver; director Sadat

always been very important to me, it’s never been such a central feature of the works I’ve worked on before. So I have leaned on my colleagues to help me learn more about how this part of opera works,” writes Sadat. “Sheila and Stephen helped me by playing and singing through the opera together with me. And as I learned more about opera, I found that it offers unique avenues for creativity that, in

“I want them to see the strength of female loyalty.”

these women and their story, and to challenge stereotypes held in the West about Afghan women and Afghan culture.” She approached Sadat, who was hesitant at first. “I wanted to revisit the story to ensure it was compatible with my worldview. But when I reread Hosseini’s novel, I found that his story still resonates through its powerful tale of beauty and womanhood,” writes Sadat via e-mail. “Between the remarkable story of these two women, the story’s setting in Afghanistan and the trust that Seattle Opera put in me, I knew I had to accept!”

Sadat didn’t know much about opera when she approached this project. “Although music has

some ways, offer even greater flexibility than cinema.”

Sadat describes the production as a juxtaposition of contrasts. “I have found that opera, as a medium, allows for a greater expression of passion than cinema does. So I wanted to create a design that blends realism and imagination to amplify that intensity.

“Because the story exists in a state of tension between tragedy and love and hope, the lighting design is constantly shifting. No two scenes are the same,” she adds. “It’s just like Sheila’s music. The beautiful combination of Eastern and Western music creates an exciting and magical feeling.”



When Sadat joined the production, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* represented a piece of Afghan history. In August 2021, history became reality. “I will never forget August 15, 2021. It was my first day meeting the Seattle Opera creative team—an exciting moment for us all,” writes Sadat. “But that very day, first my hometown and then my country fell to the Taliban. And the struggles that Mariam and Laila endure are happening again for the women of Afghanistan, who are being deprived of the right to work, the right to an education—the most basic of human rights. This opera is a narrative of women’s resilience.

“I want audiences to come away with an image of a beautiful culture full of art, literature and love stories,” she adds. “I want them to see a different narrative of women’s life and liberation, their resistance, their freedom.... I want them to see the strength of female loyalty and the power of sacrifice. And finally, I want this opera to be a cry so loud that you’ll never forget the women of Afghanistan and the Middle East. This opera is a testament to their courage.” ■

Steven Jude Tietjen, a writer living in New York City, has been a frequent contributor to OPERA NEWS since 2013.