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## The tragic timeliness of “A Thousand Splendid Suns”

An opera adaptation of Khaled Hosseini's novel arrives almost two years after the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan



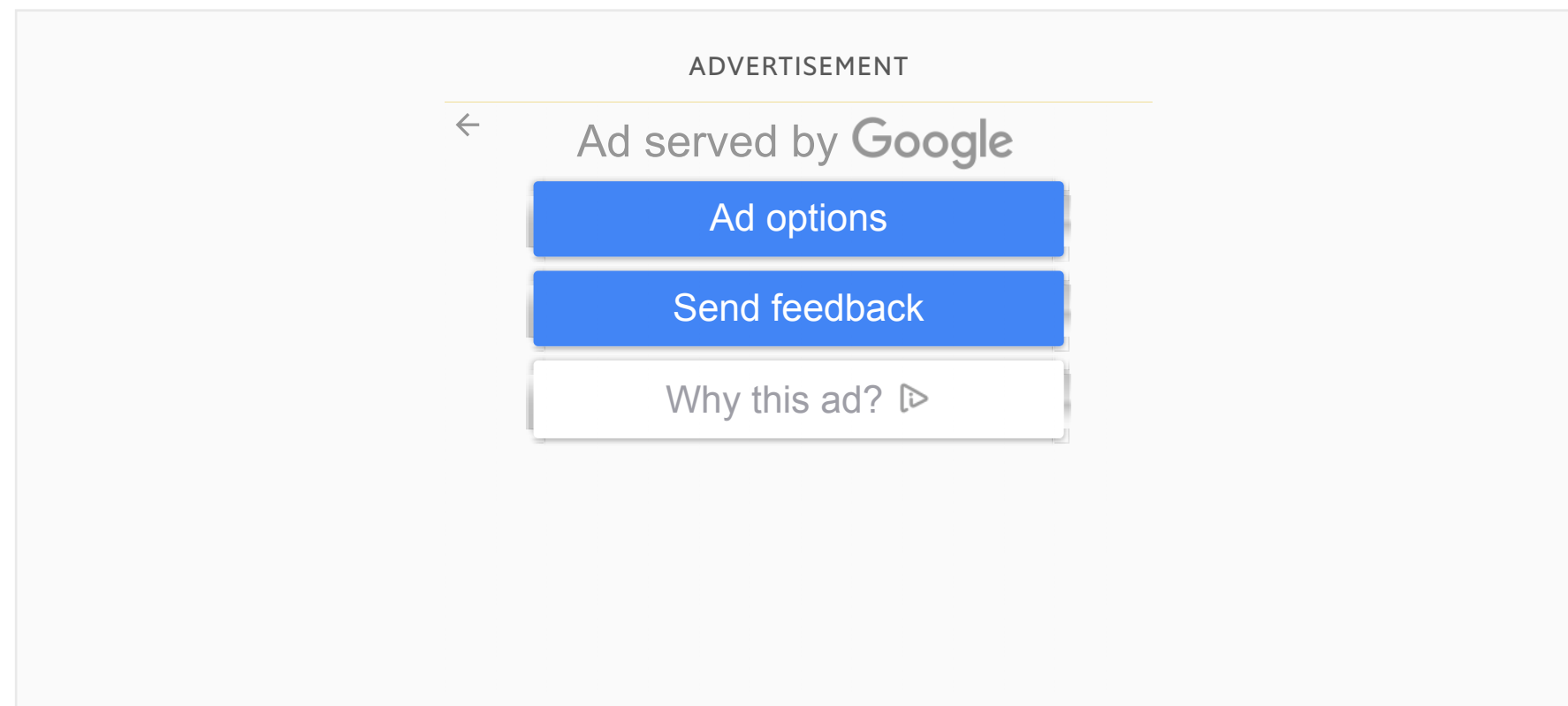
Sunny Martini/Seattle Opera

Feb 24th 2023

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A FEW YEARS ago the Seattle Opera approached Roya Sadat to direct a new production. This was slightly unusual: the Afghan film-maker had never seen an opera. Then again, she had not been to the cinema before she made her first film. She was brought up in Herat, her country's third-biggest city, under Taliban rule and all entertainment venues were closed.

It was that experience, as well as her films about the plight of women in Afghanistan, that caught the attention of Christina Scheppelmann, the general director of the Seattle Opera, who asked her to direct a new adaptation of “A Thousand Splendid Suns”. Khaled Hosseini's [novel of 2007](#) tells the story of two women of different generations, Mariam and Laila, who are both forced to marry the same man. Rasheed, a much older widower, savagely beats and humiliates them. The tale takes place over decades and against the backdrop of the Soviet-Afghan war, the Afghan civil war and the Taliban insurgency.



Mr Hosseini's book was published several years after the Islamic fundamentalist regime had been toppled; readers could take some comfort from the fact that much of the brutality described was, in theory, a thing of the past. That was still true in 2012, when Mr Hosseini gave the rights to the book to Sheila Silver, an American composer who has written the score. Yet in the summer of 2021 Ms Sadat was travelling from Kabul to Seattle with her husband and children to attend a production meeting when her sister texted to say that the Taliban had retaken power. The family has not been able to return since and is seeking asylum in America. “It's like a terrible dream,” Ms Sadat says.

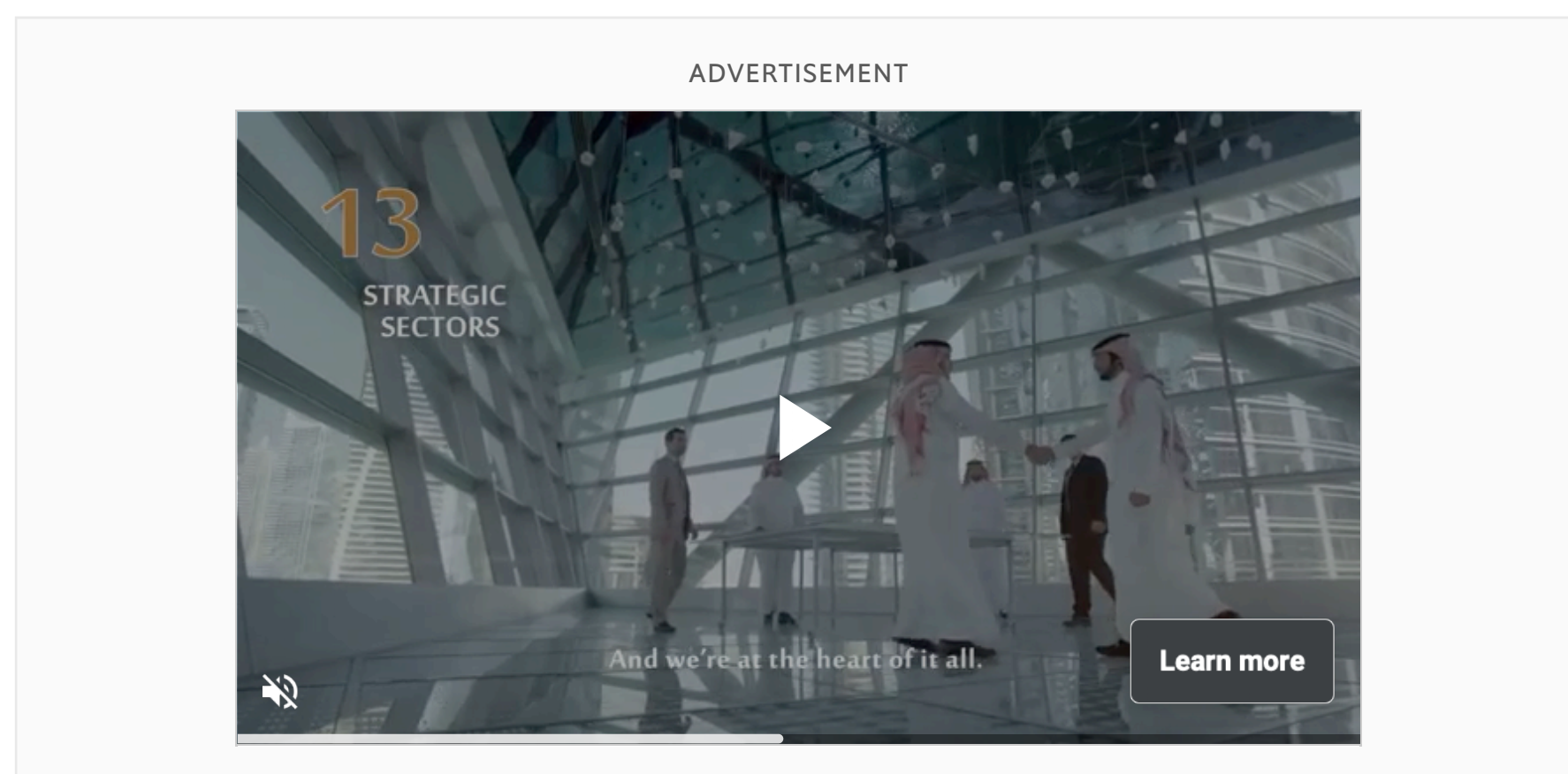
Directing the opera, which has its premiere on February 25th, “has now become a responsibility” of great significance, Ms Sadat says. She hopes that the production will refocus attention on the [situation of women](#) in Afghanistan, who have been banned once again from [universities](#), [workplaces](#) and [public life](#). After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, she studied law and politics and moved to Kabul, where she and her sister established Roya Film House, the first female-led production company in the country.



Sunny Martini/Seattle Opera

Not that everyone in Afghanistan was pleased about such developments. Ms Sadat's father initially objected to her career but relented when he saw how passionate she was. A paternal uncle refused to visit the family for years in protest. While making her debut, Ms Sadat was accosted by angry villagers who chased her and her crew away with guns.

Undeterred, Ms Sadat has examined life in rigidly conservative and patriarchal societies in her films and documentaries. “Three Dots” and “Playing the Taar” both tell the stories of young women made to marry much older men; in “A Letter to the President” a policewoman is imprisoned for defending herself against her violent husband. In 2013 she set up a film festival to promote the work of female film-makers in Afghanistan. In 2018 she was among those given an International Women of Courage Award by the American State Department.



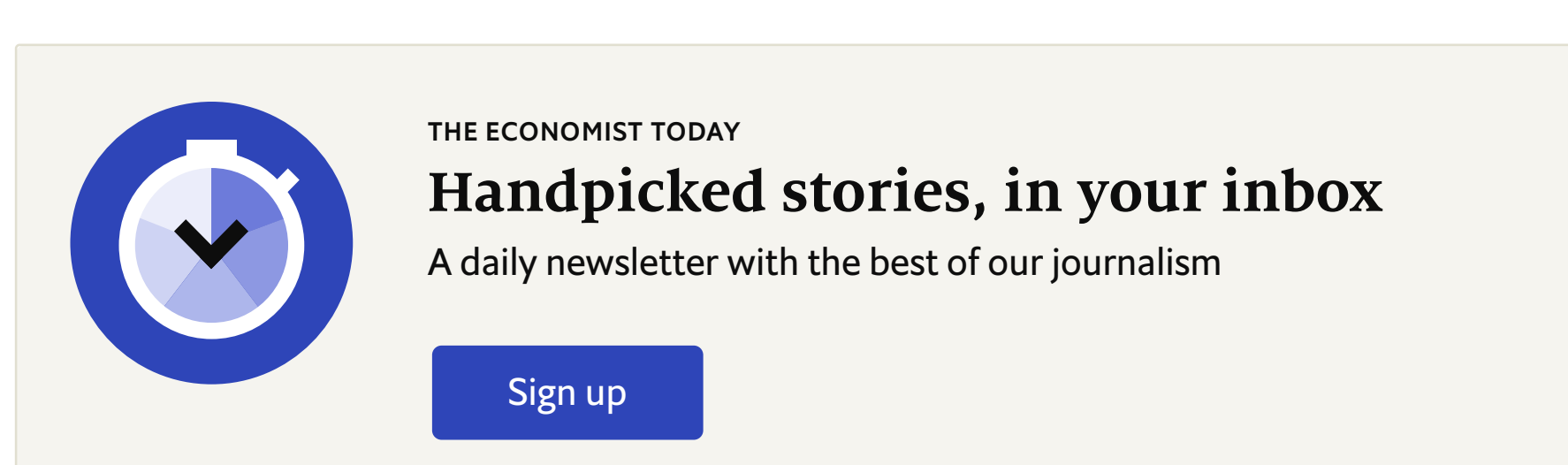
Alongside Ms Sadat, the creative team at the Seattle Opera, including Ms Silver and Stephen Kitsakos, the librettist, have done their research to ensure the production is faithful to the story's time and place. The opera house enlisted Humaira Ghilzai, an Afghan cultural consultant, as an adviser. In 2013 Ms Silver lived for six months in Pune, a city in west India, to study Hindustani music, a tradition integral to classical Afghan music. She learned how to use instruments such as the *bansuri* (flute) and the *tabla* (drums) in her score and wrote arias based on *ragas*, a form which evolved from ancient hymns sung in Hindu temples. (Some in the opera industry have argued that Ms Silver, who is Jewish and comes from Seattle, was not the best choice to tell this particular story. That attitude, she says, in effect limits storytellers to memoir.)

The mysterious, shimmering “Prelude” features a mournful *bansuri* melody and agitated *tabla* rhythms that hint at the violence ahead. The composer and librettist struggled with how to convey some of the book's most disturbing scenes, such as when Rasheed forces Mariam to eat rocks after he considers her rice undercooked. They hope to emphasise that friendship and compassion can exist alongside barbarity.

In the end, Mariam sacrifices herself for Laila and Laila is reunited with Tariq, her friend and paramour whom she believed dead. “This is a story about finding someone to love, about finding fulfilment and feeling worthy after years of being told that you're worthless,” says Mr Kitsakos. As the Taliban resumes its clampdown on women, Ms Sadat reckons the tale underscores the value of female loyalty and determination “in this terrible world”. ■

*“A Thousand Splendid Suns” runs from February 25th until March 11th at the Seattle Opera*

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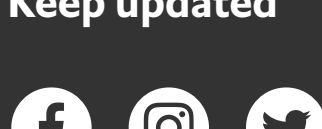
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