

An Islamic Culture In All Its Beauty

By AMEI WALLACH

IT was ordinary for the Iranian-born film installation artist Shirin Neshat to drop off her 11-year-old son, Cyrus, at his school near Battery Park on the morning of Sept. 11. It was ordinary to head up Broome Street with her partner and collaborator, Shoja Azari, on the way to the editing room.

For nearly a year, they had been preparing "Logic of the Birds (Phase One)," a new hybrid in which film and music theater engage in a dialogue and characters seem to walk from the screen to the stage and back again. Based on a medieval Persian poem about an arduous mystical journey, it was scheduled to open at the Kitchen on Tuesday. In one scene they were to edit that day, a woman leads a band of followers through a gray moonscape cracked with fissures and flame, up a shifting mountain of coal dust in which their feet can find no purchase.

It was ordinary for Ms. Neshat and Mr. Azari to pause on Broome Street and look toward the World Trade Center towers on the day when the ordinary ended. They saw a gash of fire on one tower, and then a plane and fire again, and they began to run south, back to the school and Cyrus.

They found him with his friend Hila Perry, who is Israeli and Jewish and who had been staying with them until just the day before, when her mother and 6-year-old sister, Maya, returned from Israel. As bodies rained from the blue sky, the two adults and two children ran in search of Maya at P.S. 234, were joined by the girls' mother and ran again.

"The buildings will fall, the buildings will fall!" Maya wailed.

"No, no, no," comforted the adults. They started home, and the buildings fell.

"I'll never forget that day," Ms. Neshat said. "And I don't want to forget it. I don't ever want to trivialize it."

"And then," she continued, "the police came, and the F.B.I. came, and there was a different kind of fear for us." Ms. Neshat said she feared that people who were dark-eyed and Islamic-looking would be the focus of official arrests and public rage.

They postponed the opening indefinitely and took Cyrus upstate for the weekend. By the next Monday, however, Sept. 17, it seemed more essential than ever for this

Amei Wallach has written an assessment of Shirin Neshat's career as the cover article in the October issue of Art in America.

The creators of a performance based on a medieval Persian poem say the show must go on.

contemporary rendition of a central text of Iranian culture to go on.

"We lived under terror in our country," said Mr. Azari, who like the others experienced the Shah's imperious regime and is a refugee from the still more repressive 1979 revolution of the clerics. "Now we have a feeling of terror here, that there will be killing and beating. We came up with the determination that it is even more important than before to represent the beauty of a culture. Evil doesn't know sides. Creativity and terror, construction and destruction, this is the condition of human nature. So let's create."

On Friday, "Logic of the Birds" will open at the Kitchen for seven staggered performances, through Oct. 16. Opening night proceeds will go to Engine Company No. 3, the local Chelsea firehouse, which lost firefighters in the terrorist attack.

The stark visual and sonic images in the Gesamtkunstwerk amalgam of film, music and live performance, which is still a work in progress, come out of a true collaboration by a core group of Iranian-born artists who have worked on nearly all of Ms. Neshat's celebrated film installations, starting with "Turbulent" in 1998.

The composer and vocalist Sussan Deyhim wrote and performed the melodic layering of ancient lament and explosive avant-garde sound with which a veiled woman facing an empty auditorium won the musical duel in "Turbulent." Ms. Deyhim, whose concert performances braid the primal and the guttural with a percussive urgency out of jazz, has composed and performed the music for all of Ms. Neshat's films except "Passage," this summer, which was commissioned and scored by Philip Glass.

Mr. Azari played the man musically trounced by Ms. Deyhim in "Turbulent." A writer and filmmaker himself, he has collaborated on the concept and writing of Ms. Neshat's six subsequent films. He had scouted the coal mine used in "Logic of the Birds" for his own film trilogy based on Franz Kafka's story "In the Penal Colony."

The director of photography for "Turbulent," and for Ms. Neshat's other films, was Ghasem Ebrahimian, whose own feature-



Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

The singer and composer Sussan Deyhim and cast members rehearse "Logic of the Birds (Phase One)" at the Kitchen.

length film "The Suitors" was an official selection at the 1998 Cannes Film International Festival.

For the first time, in "Logic of the Birds," the contributions of the four collaborators — Ms. Neshat, Ms. Deyhim, Mr. Ebrahimi and Mr. Azari — have been equal. Innovative in form, the film-performance piece is also impossibly utopian in process because all four had to agree on everything.

"It's tough," Ms. Neshat said over drinks with the troupe 10 days ago. "We have different personalities, perspectives, aesthetics and professions, and this time we agreed to have no leader. A lot of times," she confided with a laugh, "we came close to killing each other. Sussan was more democratic than I was. She gave everyone a chance to tell their ideas, without trashing them immediately."

Days later, as the collaborators were finishing their story board with the art direc-

tor, Shahram Karimi, Ms. Neshat said: "This moment is super positive. But what we have gone through with this process for a year is just like the spiritual journey we're showing. Every time you reach a plateau and are O.K., something else comes up."

The work takes as its starting point "The Conference of the Birds" by the great 12th-century Sufi mystic, Farid al-Din Attar Nishaburi (1145-1221), who recast ancient Persian fables and oral traditions. Like "The Mahabharata," it has been a source of theatrical and literary interpretation and experimentation for many directors and writers, including Peter Brook. In Attar's parable, a variety of birds — humans in the contemporary version at the Kitchen — discover as a newly forged community that salvation lies within each of them through self-knowledge.

"It is a moral and ethical tale about humanity evolving to the point where a

person can distinguish between good and evil and move from darkness into light," Mr. Ebrahimi said.

The artistic team lost a week of rehearsal, and more in terms of forward propulsion. So both the rough cut of the film and the rehearsal I saw were rudimentary. Generally, the rigorous enchantments and occasional missteps by Ms. Neshat and her company are the result of astonishing creative decisions at the end of the process.

At this writing, the tale begins on a darkened stage with the electrifying voice of Ms. Deyhim. Then, on a triptych of screens just above her head, a crowd of faces emerges and disappears. In the black and white film, Ms. Deyhim separates herself from the crowd, skirts a lake and enters the light-dappled water. As the film's gray tones turn rosy, she slowly submerges.

On the screen, the crowd mills in panic,

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and the actors onstage do the same. Clearly pregnant, Ms. Deyhim slowly emerges from the water on the screen, walks past the actors onstage and exits. She is rediscovered on the screen giving birth, a metaphor for the new mystical knowledge, which, Ms. Neshat said, "it is her duty to deliver" to the frantic crowd.

Onstage again, Ms. Deyhim lies down to sleep; on the screen above she floats like a cross in a white quarry's icy turquoise water. Slowly the crowd gathers. The film screens go dark. The action shifts to the stage, where, through complex musical discourse, the mystical leader exhorts the crowd to follow her. Each one has a reason not to.

Ms. Deyhim prevails, and the journey proceeds through apocalyptic fire to the mountain of black coal, which turns red when Ms. Deyhim

**Persian culture, an
artist points out,
predates Islam by
thousands of years.**

reaches the top. So does her black dress. She descends on the screen and enters onstage, her red train filling it. In the final scene, the mountain and the costumes mutate from the red of blood to the green of hope.

RoseLee Goldberg, author of the seminal 1979 study "Performance Art From Futurism to the Present," originally approached Ms. Neshat with the concept of a production involving both live performance and film. She brought the project to the Kitchen, where she had been the curator in the 1970's. Elise Bernhardt, the current director, committed the

space and \$50,000 in seed money.

Immediately, the collaborators began quoting to one another the Persian poetry they knew by heart from childhood. Since then, both context and meaning have changed.

At the Kitchen, the mythical leader is feminine, in defiance both of the fundamentalist Iranian clerics' relegation of women to the voluminous chador and Western stereotypes in which women's roles are the emblems of Islam's otherness.

In Iran, a newly elected government is attempting reforms, Mr. Azari emphasized. "Persian culture is 5,000 years old," he said, "and the Islamic invasion only happened 1,500 years ago. The history of Iran is resistance to domination through a mystical approach to Islam. Basically, what we are doing is trying to make sense of this confused identity, to go back to our roots and translate them into a universal language." □



Shirin Neshat

Sussan Deyhim in a film segment of "Logic of the Birds."