



Minnesota Women's Press

Maryam's mission

Profile: Maryam Yusefzadeh spreads the truth about her native Iran

by Delma J. Francis



Maryam Yusefzadeh remembers her teen years in the '70s with fondness. Wearing miniskirts and platform shoes, chattering with girlfriends, flirting with boys, she was just like any American teenager, except that she wasn't. Yusefzadeh grew up in Iran.

But it was not the Iran most Americans envision, she said. "I had never even seen a burka (the all-enveloping black garb worn by conservative Muslim sects)." As she speaks passionately about the country of her youth, a tiny gold cross winks at her throat. Oh yeah, she grew up Presbyterian.

Passion for Persia

Today Yusefzadeh, 51, is a woman on a mission: to teach Americans the true nature of the Iran she knew as a child and to explain how it came to be the repressive society we see today.

One of the ways she does that is through music. Her ensemble, Robayat, plays many kinds of music, in particular, Persian. Never mind that she's the only Persian in the group. The heart for beauty, peace and humanity that is infused throughout the music is what counts, she said. "It's the way I was brought up," she said, "to see the beauty in everything." Yusefzadeh started Robayat in 1988, "not only to play Persian music, but to have an open venue to explain to Americans that Iranians are people of heart,

Maryam Yusefzadeh. Photo by Eva Studena. people of humanity. To provide some balance as to how Iran was perceived." It has worked, she said, "for those who are open to receiving it."

Yusefzadeh, of south Minneapolis, first visited the United States, Minnesota in particular, in 1968 to visit her older sister, a Macalester College graduate. Yusefzadeh returned every summer, liking what she saw. She moved here in 1975 to attend college at the University of Minnesota Duluth, studying fine arts and music with an emphasis on vocal performance.

"One of the biggest reasons for me being here is the Constitution. It's the closest thing to that of Persia in the beginning," she said. "The freedom, the human rights, the principles that this country were built upon, that is the reason I came here." To Yusefzadeh, it was to some extent like the Iran where she had grown up before the Shah was deposed and the fundamentalist Ayahtollah Khomeini returned from exile to grasp the reins of power-assisted by the machinations of the CIA, she said.

Humanistic religion

To sit for a while with Yusefzadeh, a petite whirlwind, is to receive a history lesson.

"The first human rights bill was written 3,000 years ago by King Cyrus of Persia," Yusefzadeh said, her voice warming with pride.

Another source of pride for Yusefzadeh: Persia was home to the first monolithic religion, Zoroastrianism. "Zoroastrianism didn't discriminate," she said. "All people were free to practice their own religion. All the Jews who had been displaced came to Persia. They were able to live any way they wanted. We even had a Jewish queen, Queen Esther."

Her family was part of a large bloc of Christians. Her 90-year-old uncle, Massoud Ershadi, is still a leader of Tehran's Presbyterian Church, a position of no small discomfort in the country where evangelizing any religion except Islam is subject to death. The Christian community was close. "We shared our church with Episcopalians and others, and we held Christmas together. When I moved here I was shocked by the divisions among the denominations."

Today, "In many ways I'm a practicing Buddhist. The essence of what Christ taught us is Buddhist belief: compassion for all, we're all created in His image, empowered by Him. We are complete in the image of God. We are all on our own journey; it has nothing to do with anyone else's journey, yet we are all connected. To gain wisdom, you have to shut up and listen to your heart."

Betty Boop & Me

Yusefzadeh's politics are no secret to anyone who's spent any time with her. "I'm a liberal's liberal," she says. "And absolutely I'm a feminist. I am not a man-hater. That's not the point. It's the equality, allowing people to be all that they are." Surprisingly, her feminist hero is the curvy, curly-haired cartoon character Betty Boop. "I'm a Betty Boop fanatic," she said. "Here's a voluptuous, independent female" at a time when most women weren't single by choice. "I grew up saying, 'That's the kind of woman I want to be.'"

Yusefzadeh grew up in an intellectual family, the baby of five children. "In six years my mother had four children. It was seven years after that before I was born. I was the oops," she said with a smile.

Her mother, Vajihen, was a teacher and her father, Habib, worked for the U.S. embassy, leading the Peace Corps office in Tehran. At a time when the average Iranian man had a seventh-grade education, her father held a degree in literature from an American college. Three of Yusefzadeh's siblings hold master's degrees, the fourth a Ph.D.; she holds an MBA.

International pain

In an ironic twist, the U.S. embassy that had provided her father employment and introduced her to America before she ever set foot on these shores became the scene of an international incident that led to one of the most distressing periods of her life.

Yusefzadeh was a college student when 70 Americans were taken hostage at the embassy on Nov. 4, 1979. On a day-to-day basis, life was difficult. "I couldn't tell people I was Iranian ... I had to become someone else," she said because of the antipathy toward Iranians. With her caramel complexion, she called herself Greek or Italian, a humiliating situation for someone who possesses such pride of the country she carries in her heart.

After the hostages were released, the heat let up for a time. Yusefzadeh moved on in her career, working for IBM, a Big Four consulting firm and a dot-com company. She married her husband, Ira Keer, a Russian-American Jew. And she was able to reclaim her Iranian identity. Then along came 9/11.

"I was sitting there day after day crying, and just because Iran had been in the news recently," geography-challenged Americans confused the two I-R countries, linking Iran with the terrorist attacks rather than Iraq. "People would ask me, 'How are you handling this?' assuming I was part of the craziness. I'm neither Arab nor Muslim."

Then fear set in. President George W. Bush created the Department of Homeland Security, an agency designed to prevent terrorist attacks within the United States and reduce the country's vulnerability to terrorism. But outraged constitutional scholars railed against some of the methods of ferreting out terrorists, saying they went against the basic tenets of the Constitution and Bill of Rights. "I had to be so careful," Yusefzadeh said, the memory of those days fresh in her mind. "I could have been deported for saying anything against this [American] government."

Professional strain

When dot-com companies began to tank, Yusefzadeh was again in the job market. "I couldn't find full-time work with an Iranian last name," she said. Though she eventually found work as an independent contractor with several consulting firms, it came with a price. "I had to change my name to my husband's last name to even get people to look at my resume. I was an established businesswoman. Why would I change my name? It was a very difficult time." Eventually she was able to reclaim her name and to work as a consultant and IT strategist.

"What I do as an Iranian, every aspect of my life, is to expose Americans to the culture, history, arts, the poetry and what I call the essence of the people of Iran ... that's all that I am about." And of course, there's Robayat; the group's first CD will be available next year.

Yusefzadeh hasn't been back to Iran since 1977, and says she would not want to live there again, even if the culture returned to what she knew as a kid. "I'm so Americanized I really don't think I could live with the limitations," she said. "I like being able to walk my dog (Bebe) at 10 at night in my shorts." Bebe, short for who else? Betty Boop.

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For more information about the musical side of Maryam Yusefzadeh go to www.mymusicproductions.com. The profile appears in every issue of the Minnesota Women's Press. It reflects our founding principle and guiding philosophy that every woman has a story. Readers are welcome to submit suggestions for profile subjects. Email your ideas to editor@womenspress.com.

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