

# SEATTLE OPERA.

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: November 29, 2022**

Contact: Joshua Gailey, 206-676-5559, [joshua.gailey@seattleopera.org](mailto:joshua.gailey@seattleopera.org)

Press images: [seattleopera.smugmug.com/2223/1000Suns/](https://seattleopera.smugmug.com/2223/1000Suns/)

Password: "press" (case sensitive)

"By the end you are not only left with a tear, but with a fire lit within. It is above all a story of hope and of life, the heroism that comes with love..." —*The Guardian*

## **Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* Is Now an Inspiring Opera, Directed by Acclaimed Afghan Filmmaker Roya Sadat**

**World Premiere at Seattle Opera  
February 25–March 11, 2023**

SEATTLE, WA—Following a recent "triumph with the emotionally trenchant *Blue*" (*Oregon ArtsWatch*), Seattle Opera is doubling down on its commitment to champion new American opera and bring today's stories to the opera stage. On February 25, 2023, McCaw Hall will host the world premiere of [\*A Thousand Splendid Suns\*](#), written by composer **Sheila Silver** and librettist **Stephen Kitsakos**, based on the gripping novel by Khaled Hosseini.

Informed by Hosseini's childhood in his native Afghanistan, *Suns* was praised by *The New York Times* for its stirring "glimpses of daily life in a country known to most Americans only through news accounts of war and terrorism." The narrative centers Mariam and Laila, two Afghan women brought together under brutal Taliban rule whose devotion to each other ultimately transcends their challenging circumstances.

Mariam and Laila's world comes to life on stage through the vision of stage director **Roya Sadat**, whose trailblazing work as one of Afghanistan's first female film directors has earned more than 20 international awards, including the 2021 Kim

Dae-jung Nobel Peace Film Award. Sadat has focused on creating a detailed and believable experience for the audience, with the goal of generating empathy.

"I want to draw the audience into this world to ensure that this story lives on in people's hearts and minds," said Sadat. "Though the Taliban has taken away my right to work and my right to artistic creativity in my home country, I can raise my voice here. Opera has given me the strength to be the voice for millions of women whose right to speak has been taken away. I want this opera to be a cry so loud that you'll never forget the women of Afghanistan and the Middle East."

When work on the opera began in 2009, the story described a bygone chapter in Afghanistan's history, when the Taliban dominated and women's rights were denied. On August 15, 2021, the Taliban again took over the Afghan government, bringing a new layer of contemporary resonance to the struggles endured by Mariam and Laila. As the women in today's Afghanistan are once more deprived of basic human rights in an ever-changing political environment, their strength and resilience has focused and inspired the women-led creative team assembled by Seattle Opera.

That team includes a professional role not often seen in opera: a cultural consultant. **Humaira Ghilzai**—whose work in film, television, and theatre utilizes her extensive knowledge of Afghan history and culture—has collaborated with Silver and Kitsakos on *Suns* since 2016. In addition to working directly with the composer and librettist on the language and storytelling in the piece, Ghilzai advises Seattle Opera leadership on perspectives in the Afghan community and assists in curating opportunities for audiences to learn about Afghan art and culture.

"My work is about cultural authenticity," said Ghilzai. "Audiences connect with a story when the world of the production feels *real*. This story is also quite timely—it's about how women are treated in the world and whether they are allowed to make choices for themselves. These are issues we are seeing right now, not just in Afghanistan, but in the protests for women's rights in Iran and the struggle for abortion access in the United States."

"It's exactly the right time for this story to be taking the stage in America," agreed Seattle Opera General Director Christina Scheppelmann. "While the timeless themes of love, fear, freedom, and sacrifice will be familiar to regular operagoers, the unimaginable challenges faced by the opera's heroines have taken on renewed urgency. By exploring the universality of Laila and Mariam's bond, we can shine a light on our shared humanity in the face of adversity."

This bond among women is what first drew composer Sheila Silver, who was raised in Seattle, to the project.

"I fell in love immediately with Mariam and Laila," said Silver. "I was inspired by their courage and their devotion to one another. It's a powerful story that demands to be sung."

Supported by a Guggenheim Fellowship, Silver studied Hindustani music traditions with master singer Kedar Narayan Bodas. Hindustani music has been associated with Afghanistan since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the country's eastern provinces were precariously controlled by the Moghul Empire. Its influence can be heard in the sound world of *Suns*, which adds *tabla* percussion and a bamboo flute called a *bansuri* to the full orchestra in the pit.

"While *Suns* is firmly grounded in the Western operatic tradition, elements of Hindustani melodic and harmonic structures have been infused into my own musical voice," said Silver, who credits her studies in South Asia with a profound influence on her compositional style. "When I went, I had no idea how powerful the experience would be."

Seattle Opera has programmed a robust slate of community and education events to promote Afghanistan's rich cultural and artistic legacy. An [Afghan arts showcase](#) on February 11 will feature artwork rescued from Kabul by artist-activist group [ArtLords](#); a panel discussion on Afghan film, music, poetry, and visual art; and a performance by [Homayoun Sakhi](#) on the lute-like *rubab*, one of Afghanistan's national instruments. Films directed by Roya Sadat will be screened at the **Seattle International Film Festival** on February 12 and a collaboration with Lake City-based [Refugee Artisan Initiative](#) will commission nine Afghan women who have chosen to design and embroider a custom garment, to be displayed alongside an original ArtLords mural in McCaw Hall during the run of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. In addition, Seattle Opera is collecting donations of food and supplies at each performance to support Afghan refugees in the Puget Sound region.

"When warfare breaks out, when political turmoil turns to violence, women are always the first to suffer," said Sadat. "Syrian women, Ukrainian women, Iranian women, the women captured by the Taliban—women all over the world are suffering due to political injustice. I want this opera to stand as a reminder of their strength in the face of violence. This opera is a narrative of women's resilience."

### **About Roya Sadat**

Widely recognized as Afghanistan's first female film and television producer during the post-Taliban era, Roya Sadat is the winner of more than 20 international film awards, including the 2021 Kim Dae-jung Nobel Peace Film Award and the 2018 International Women of Courage Award presented by the United States Department of State. Sadat was featured among the BBC's 100 Inspiring and Influential Women for 2021, and her three films—*A Letter to the President* ('17), *Playing the Taar* ('08), and *Three Dots* ('03)—have been invited to more than 60 international film festivals. *A Letter to the President* was selected as the official entry from Afghanistan for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 90<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards. In addition to her feature films, she has produced eight documentary films, three television programs, and a music video.

### **About Sheila Silver**

Sheila Silver is a distinguished composer of chamber and orchestral music, songs, and opera. "*Only a few composers in any generation enliven the art form with their musical language and herald new directions in music. Sheila Silver is such a visionary.*" (*Wetterauer Zeitung*) *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was developed with the support of American Opera Projects, the National Endowment for the Arts, and Opera America, including two Virginia B. Toulmin awards (Discovery Grant and Commissioning Grant). As a 2014 Guggenheim Fellow, she traveled to India to study Hindustani music with master singer Kedar Narayan Bodas in order to incorporate elements of Hindustani music into her score for *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Her opera *The Wooden Sword* won the Sackler Prize in Music Composition for Opera. Other awards include the Rome Prize, American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Composers Award, a Bunting Institute/Radcliffe Fellowship, and the Prix de Paris. Her work has been commissioned and performed throughout the world. She is Professor Emeritus of Music at Stony Brook University. Silver was born and raised in Seattle, Washington, and began studying piano at the age of 5. She and her husband, filmmaker John Feldman, make their home in the Hudson Valley, New York. Their son, Victor Feldman, is a journalist.

### **About Seattle Opera**

Established in 1963, Seattle Opera is committed to serving the people of the Pacific Northwest through music, storytelling, and programs for people of all ages. Each year, more than 80,000 people attend the company's performances, and more than 100,000 people are served through school performances, radio broadcasts, and more. The organization brings opera to life in a number of different ways, offering artistic excellence through national and international collaborations. Seattle Opera strives to create an environment where artists, staff, behind-the-scenes workers, and members of the community feel a strong connection to the company, and to the art of opera. Follow Seattle Opera on Facebook, Twitter, SoundCloud, and on Classical KING FM 98.1.

### **Performances**

- World Premiere
- Music by Sheila Silver, libretto by Stephen Kitsakos
- Sung in English with English supertitles
- Run time approx. three hours with one intermission
- Tickets \$35–349

**McCaw Hall (321 Mercer St, Seattle, WA 98109)**

Saturday, February 25, 2023 at 7:30pm

Sunday, February 26, 2023 at 2:00pm

Friday, March 3, 2023 at 7:30pm

Sunday, March 5, 2023 at 2:00pm

Wednesday, March 8, 2023 at 7:30pm

Saturday, March 11, 2023 at 7:30pm

**Conductor:** Viswa Subbaraman

**Director:** Roya Sadat

**Cultural Consultant:** Humaira Ghilzai

**Mariam:** Karin Mushegain

**Laila:** Maureen McKay

**Rasheed:** John Moore

**Tariq:** Rafael Moras

**Nana/Market Woman #1/Wajma:** Tess Altiveros

**Hakim/Driver:** Ashraf Sewailam

**Fariba/Wife #3:** Sarah Coit

**Wife #1/Market Woman #3:** Sarah Mattox

**Wife #2/Market Woman #2:** Ibidunni Ojikutu

**Jalil/Wakil/Guard:** Martin Bakari

**Mullah/Sharif/Soldier:** Andrew Potter

*For more information and to hear musical excerpts, visit [seattleopera.org/suns](https://seattleopera.org/suns).*

###