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Houston Grand Opera

presents its 46th world premiere

The Bricklayer

Music by Gregory Spears, Libretto by Farnoosh Moshiri

March 15 - 21, 2012

Houston, TX — Feb. 20, 2012: As part of HGOCO's *Song of Houston: East + West* initiative, Houston Grand Opera presents its 46th world premiere, ***The Bricklayer*, March 15 – 21, 2012**. Based on a short story by renowned Iranian-American author **Farnoosh Moshiri** (*The Bathhouse*, *Against Gravity*), *The Bricklayer* tells the real-life story of a family torn apart by the Iranian revolution. The score is composed by **Gregory Spears**, whose work has been called “astonishingly beautiful” (*The New York Times*) and “coolly entrancing” (*The New Yorker*).

This personal and epic odyssey emerges from the 1979 overthrow of the Shah of Iran by Islamic revolutionaries. With the new leadership established and any pretense of democracy abolished, a massive purge and assault on politicians, writers, artists, and feminists began.

The opera is set in Houston and begins at Bush Intercontinental Airport, where Bitá and her daughter, Shahrzad, are awaiting the arrival of her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Parvin. Coming to Houston from Tehran, they tell of their torturous experiences - the execution of their son as well as the arrest and beating of Mr. Parvin. Leaving behind their old life, they begin to heal and find hope in their new life with their daughter here in Houston.

Echoing a chapter in her own story, Moshiri was awaiting her parents' arrival at the airport. “When I saw [my father], I was shocked. I couldn't recognize him. My handsome father resembled King Lear in the last act. He was crushed because of all that injustice.”

Moshiri tells of her own experience of escaping after refusing to sign an agreement to obey the new regime. “In February 1983, at a reading of my play, my director and actors were arrested. I went underground and escaped the country on foot with my husband and two-year-old son.”

Reflecting on how art can unify communities, HGOCO Director Sandra Bernhard says, “Music is a universal language, and a personal story creates a path to understanding. Sharing stories set to music allows communities to share journeys, passions, home, and place that, in turn, become the fabric of our community.”

Composer Gregory Spears incorporates both western and Iranian music using traditional instruments such as the ney, an end-blown Persian bamboo flute. “My approach has been to expose myself to Persian music and then listen closely for the sympathetic resonances between my other vocal writing and this music.”

Spears comments “It's a shame that so much of our understanding of the Middle East is colored by the lens of politics and the media rather than history and art. I wanted the chance to explore Persian culture through the lens

of art and opera. Much of the European music I love – medieval troubadour music, Russian music – explores the intersections of Persian and western sonic sensibilities.”

The chamber ensemble, led by Music Director **David Hanlon**, combines classical western instruments such as clarinet, violin, cello and harp alongside Persian instruments such as the Ney which will be played by Kamran Thunder from the Austin based band, *Tehranosaurus*.

Formed in 2008 the six member band *Tehranosaurus* is led by Fared Shafinury. Born on the Gulf of Mexico, Shafinury absorbed the rhythms of jazz, blues and indie rock. Primarily self-taught in the setar (Persian lute) and santur (strings) he also studied under some of Iran’s most prominent Masters. His music reflects what opera, and HGOco, at its heart is about – bringing people and traditions together to build common ground artistically. Shafinury will share his knowledge and experience of Persian culture and music by presenting a pre-performance talk as well as performing a 30minute set before the opera.

This collaboration underscores Spears’ admiration of *East + West*. “What I like about this project,” he says, “is that the east/west-ness of the [opera] is reflected and incorporated at all levels, from the conception, creation, and casting down to the selection of venues. It is not a superficial blend.”

Cultural Partner: Iranian Cultural Foundation.

World Premiere, Subsequent Performances, and Ancillary Events

WORLD PREMIERE: March 15

Start Time: 8:00 p.m.

DURATION: 2hrs

VENUE: Cullen Theater, Wortham Center, Texas Avenue, Houston, Texas. 713-228-6737

LANGUAGE: Sung with projected English translations

An exploration of culture through music and text with Farnoosh Moshiri, Gregory Spears, Fared Shafinury and *Tehranosaurus*, followed by the world premiere of *The Bricklayer* by Farnoosh Moshiri and Gregory Spears.

Additional performances:

- **Friday March 16**
8:00p.m, Arab American Cultural & Community Center (10555 Stancliff Road)
- **Sunday March 18**
4:00p.m, Persian Nowruz Festival, Discovery Green (1500 McKinney Street)
- **Tuesday March 20**
6:00p.m, Baker Ripley Neighborhood Center (6500 Rookin Street)

HGO has also planned ancillary events within the community:

- **Saturday March 3, 2:00p.m – 3:00p.m.** Brazos Bookstore
Discussion: Librettist Farnoosh Moshiri will join Rich Levy, Executive Director, Inprint to discuss the creative process behind writing *The Bricklayer*, the journey from page to stage and turning a short story into opera.
- **Thursday, March 8 12:00p.m,** University of Houston
Master Class: Composer Gregory Spears will visit University of Houston composer forum to discuss his creative process for *The Bricklayer*.

Tickets and information visit <http://www.houstongrandopera.org/tickets/calendar/view.aspx?id=1873>

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Farnoosh Moshiri was born into a literary family in Tehran. Her plays, short stories, and poems were published in Iranian literary magazines before the 1979 revolution and in anthologies published outside Iran in the 1980s. In 1983, she fled her country after refusing to sign an agreement to obey the new regime. Moshiri went underground, escaping first to Afghanistan, then to India. She arrived in Houston in 1987 and currently teaches literature and creative writing at University of Houston campuses. She is the recipient of several literary awards, including the Florida Review's 2008 Editor's Prize in Non-Fiction; the 2006 Valiente Award of Voices Breaking Boundaries; the Black Heron Press Award for Social Fiction for *The Crazy Dervish and The Pomegranate Tree* (2003) and for *The Bathhouse* (2001); the Barbara Deming Award for Peace and Social Justice (1999);

The Barthelme Memorial Fellowship for Non-Fiction (1997); and the Prose Award of the University of Houston (1996). Moshiri is the author of *At the Wall of the Almighty*.

Gregory Spears writes instrumental and vocal music that blends stylistic aspects of romanticism, minimalism, and early music. His work has been performed by the American Composers Orchestra, the NOW Ensemble, the New York Youth Symphony, Center City Opera Theater, Present Music, So Percussion, and the Eighth Blackbird Ensemble. The JACK Quartet recently commissioned him to write a string quartet based on his experience as composer-in-residence at the Buttonwood Psychiatric Unit in New Jersey, and he is working on a new collaborative dance opera with Christopher Williams. In 2012, he begins work on an evening-length opera based on the novel *Fellow Travelers* in collaboration with writer Greg Pierce and director Kevin Newbury. New Amsterdam Records recently released Spears' new work, *Requiem*, an alchemy of religion and bedtime story which was originally commissioned by Williams to accompany a new dance work. In addition to his work as a composer, Spears teaches a freshman writing seminar, Music and Madness, at Princeton University; it explores the popularized link between creativity and mental illness. He lives in Brooklyn.

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High-resolution production photos and headshots can be found at <http://www.houstongrandopera.org/pressreleases>
Username and Password: **hgopress**

Since its inception in 1955, Houston Grand Opera has grown from a small regional organization into an internationally renowned opera company. HGO enjoys a reputation for commissioning and producing new works, including 46 world premieres and six American premieres since 1973. In addition to producing and performing world-class opera, HGO contributes to the cultural enrichment of Houston and the nation through a diverse and innovative program of performances, community events, and education projects that reaches the widest possible public. HGO has toured extensively, including trips to Europe and Asia, and it is the only opera company to have won a Tony, two Grammy awards, and two Emmy awards. HGO's performances are broadcast nationally and internationally over the WFMT Radio Network, New York City's WQXR, the European Broadcasting Union and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Through HGOco, Houston Grand Opera creates opportunities for Houstonians of all ages and backgrounds to observe, participate in and create art. Its *Song of Houston* project is an ongoing initiative to create and share work based on stories that define the unique character of our city and its diverse cultures. Since 2007, HGOco has commissioned ten new works along with countless innovative community projects, reaching more than 750,000 people in the greater Houston metropolitan area.