

***Legdropping the Iron Sheikh: An AutoEthnographic Performance Selection  
from Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show***

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*Legdropping the Iron Sheikh is an autoethnographic performance selection from Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show. Burnt City (or شهر سوخته) is a solo performance about United States-Iran relations. This performance uses poetry, humor, video, and the Farsi language to excavate how domestic abuse at home is congruous to violence inflicted by governments on citizens. In Legdropping the Iron Sheikh, the fifth scene from the production, Hamzehee juxtaposes parallels between his father's U.S. arrival during the 1979 Iranian Revolution with the Iron Sheikh's 1980s' battles with the All-American Hulk Hogan. This autoethnographic performance is backgrounded by an edited and x-ray'd video of the January 23, 1984 Madison Square Garden telecast of Hogan-Sheik's WWF World Championship title match. This creative essay, script, and performance provides insight into this match as a critique of 1980's U.S.-Iran relations, as well as Hamzehee's relationship with his Persian father, arguing that the impacts of domestic abuse felt at home have parallels to those inflicted by homelands. A video of the performance is included as a hyperlink.*

*Keywords: Iron Sheik, Wrestling, Autoethnography, Performance, Iran*

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**Please click the following link to access a video of Josh Hamzehee performing [\*Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show!\*](#)**

In *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh*, Khosrow Vaziri's infamous 1980s professional wrestling character becomes an entry point for me to performatively interrogate how presentations of United States-Iran relations reflected and impacted my relationships with my Iranian-born father and the cultures I was born into. This

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eight-minute scene from *Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show!* is an example of how the then-World Wrestling Federation employed the Iron Sheik to reify xenophobic stereotypes, appealing “to a politically conservative audience, and that this appeal closely mirrors the cultural politics in the public arena” (May 80). By using wrestlers like Hulk Hogan and the Iron Sheik to bring charged political events into the ring, the WWF did not need “to create and define its own heroes and villains” (Mondak 145). Instead, the WWF relied on a blur of convergence, drawing upon real life conflicts and stereotypes to blend reality and fiction (Reinhard and Olson). They used real world consequences to manufacture stakes and backstory, otherized non-white bodies like Vaziri’s Iron Sheik to heighten tension amongst its majority-white viewership, and family televisions were exposed to a melting pot of ethical implications that occupied “the larger reality beyond the squared circle” (Castleberry et al. 77).

In this article, I bridge creative essay, show script, and live performance to help articulate the impacts xenophobic cultural characterizations can have when the representation is utilized as bonding in father-son relationships. I, Joshua/Kurosh, use this autoethnographic staged performance to acknowledge that professional wrestling’s famous January 23, 1984 hero/villain battle between Hulk Hogan and the Iron Sheik is one way I continue to understand how I navigate my Persian and white identities. And what better way to wrestle with staged performance than with a staged performance about wrestling! Throughout this essay, I weave the performance text I created with an analysis of my methods, research process, and reflexive observations. After setting the stage for this performance, I structurally break up *Legdropping the Iron Sheik* into four corners: Part 1: Video Introduction, Part 2: From Parts Unknown, Part 3: Ach-Ptew!, and Part 4: Heels and Faces.

### ***Setting the Stage for the Sheik***

*Legdropping the Iron Sheikh* is an eight-minute performance selection from my 2019 full-length production of *Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show*. *Burnt City* (or شهر سوخته) is a 45-minute solo performance about how United States-Iran relations have historically impacted familial relationships, how political divides between the two nations have magnified over time, and how the adversarial relationship presented through popular culture representations can impact identity formation. And, yes, it is a comedy ... of horrors! In *Burnt City*, I use poetry, humor, video, and the Farsi language to autoethnographically excavate how domestic abuse at home is congruous to violence inflicted by governments on citizens. By diving into my bi-racial cultural upbringing, I provide audiences experiential insight into how abuse and gaslighting by homelands parallels domestic abuse at home. The show’s program lays out the plot:

It's 2032 (or ۱۴۱۲). *Burnt City* takes a trip through U.S.-Iran relations, into an ahistoric understanding of the past, and warning of a future that might be closer than we would like to admit. Deported to *Shahr-e Sukhte*, Iran, U.S.-born Kurosh is alarmed: It's an apocalyptic graveyard! To escape ghosts, gaslights & gods he must unearth: WHAT'S BLOOD GOT TO DO WITH IT? In *Burnt City*, I use several vignettes, performance methodologies, and diverse style and staging choices to both disentangle and complicate how I, Joshua/Kurosh, have come to understand the Persian and U.S. cultures I was born into.

*Legdropping the Iron Sheikh* is a particularly rich vignette of *Burnt City* that explores familial bonding and cultural representation through one of the most pivotal hero/villain moments in wrestling history, the January 23, 1984 WWF World Championship title match featuring Hulk Hogan versus the Iron Sheik. While this article focuses on *Legdropping the Iron Sheik* and 1980s wrestling consumption, I must note it cannot be completely separated from the broader exploration of Iran-U.S. relations offered by the full performance of *Burnt City*. After a lifetime of memories, six months of concept development, and five weeks of rehearsal, I first performed *Burnt City* in February 2019 for a sold-out four-show run at Louisiana State University's HopKins Black Box theatre (Advocate Staff). Later, *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh* was accepted to the 2019 National Communication Association conference as part of the performance panel, "Democracy *IS* a Spectator Sport!: Using Performances of Identity to Interrogate the Polarizing Impacts of Sports on Political and Interpersonal Discourse." The YouTube video presentation of [Burnt City: A Dystopian Bilingual One-Persian Show!](#) was recorded during its March 2020 four-show production run at University of Northern Iowa's Interpreters Theatre (Weber). The portion of the performance featuring *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh* begins at 17:42 and ends at 26:00.

In *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh*, I use spoken word poetry and creative staging to juxtapose my father's U.S. arrival during the 1979 Iranian Revolution with the Iron Sheik's 1980s battles with the All-American Hulk Hogan. *Legdropping the Iron Sheik* uses embodied and digital performance techniques to turn the conceits of wrestling outward in order to critique the content of its form. My performance interacts with an edited x-ray'd video of the January 23, 1984 Madison Square Garden telecast of Hogan and Sheik's WWF World Championship title match. My x-ray'd video editing technique is a combination of effects that first turns video into shades of green, white, and black, and second plays with a slow motion tempo to heighten the visuals of bodies and movements. WWE Network's online streaming service (where you can find this match in full) refers to this battle as the "birth of Hulkamania." Wrestling scholars like Jeffrey Mondak go further, stating "wrestling's resurgence in the 1980s

can be traced” to the moment the American Hogan legdropped the Iranian Sheik (140). By complicating the Sheik’s narrative on stage with my own, I actively work against essentializing culture, against presenting “a simplistic, xenophobic interpretation of international political events” that was a characteristic of 1980s U.S. wrestling (Mondak 146). The x-ray’d video editing, then, becomes analogous to how I x-ray’d experiences and research through spoken text and live embodiment.

In “Wrestling with the Revolution: The Iron Sheik and the American Cultural Response to the 1979 Iranian Revolution,” Rahmani remarks how U.S. “antagonism toward the Middle East is crystallized” in the Sheik” (95), producing a dangerous exploration of cultural hatred. Dozal notes the Iron Sheik served “as a representation of Iran that could be defeated by American wrestlers ... to symbolically re-establish America’s dominance” (47). In the 1980s, power and pride seemed to go archaically hand-in-hand in both American patriotism as well as the traditional conceptions of Persian masculinity. During that time period, wrestling characters often depicted:

A world where might makes right and moral authority is exercised by brute force.... It evokes racial and ethnic stereotypes that demean groups even when they are intended to provide positive role models. It provokes homophobic disgust and patriarchal outrage against any and all incursions beyond heterosexual male dominance. (Jenkins 64).

The career of the Iron Sheik is a clear example of WWE-promoted xenophobia, crystallized antagonism, and patriarchal outrage. The implications of these portrayals are magnified because they are often packaged for audiences with “implicit (and frequently explicit) instructions ... on how to orient to attending phenomena” (Foy 173). In professional wrestling the Middle East is often conflated as one barbaric region, and brown performers are shuffled between nationalities to increase audience vitriol for the sake of conflict and to support the character that is most American. A clear example of this happened in 1991: the Iron Sheik returned to the WWE after a hiatus and then proceeded to perform as the *Iraqi Colonel Mustafa*. There was “nary a flicker of public outrage” (Rahmani 98), inferring audiences either did not understand the difference between Iran and Iraq, they did understand and encouraged the conflation, or they did not care.

Growing up, the Iron Sheik was one of the only Persians I saw on TV! I learned, when a crowd chants “U.S.A” *at* you, they are often screaming at what you are not. When the Sheik spits back at the U.S.A., he cements himself and his homeland of Iran as heels to the audience, feeding political tensions outside the confines of the wrestling arena and encouraging audiences to hate him back. Dozal writes, “non-white wrestlers typically assume more threatening roles as “heels”—the wrestling term for the antagonist—while white wrestlers often assume roles as

“faces”—the wrestling term for the protagonist” (42). When a face is victorious over a heel, it reinforces the face’s virtues while outcasting whatever the heel represents. This face/heel binary becomes extremely complicated when cultural and familial relationships of the audience are shared with the culture a heel represents and further problematized when positive media representations of that culture are rare. Through *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh*, I explore impacts of an anti-Persian wrestling narrative consumed by a Persian parent and child in a Los Angeles home. While I was not born when the Hogan-Sheik match aired, bootleg VHS’s were regularly acquired and re-acquired by my father from local video stores, so this specific match became a recurring part of my upbringing.

***Legdropping the Iron Sheikh, Part 1: Video Introduction (0:00-3:24)***

[The Iranian National Anthem plays as the scene begins, sung by a female vocalist. On the projection screen, a heavily distorted/x-ray’d video appears showing the January 23, 1984 Madison Square Garden telecast of the WWF World Championship title match, Hulk Hogan vs. the Iron Sheik. In the locker room, commentator Mean Gene Okerlund interviews the Iron Sheik’s manager, the *white* Ayatollah Freddie Blassie. Then, the Iron Sheik is interviewed:]

Blassie: [Inaudible].

Okerlund: Alright, let me talk to the man who is currently the reigning World Wrestling Federation champion, from Iran, the Iron Sheik. Undoubtedly, the stiffest test of your short career as the world champion.

Sheik: [In Farsi: Greetings and polite words to the world.]

Okerlund: Wait a minute, I know you speak English—[*know you speak, know you speak, know you speak English. Speak English. I know you speak English*]—Sheik. Please.

Sheik: Okay, now, Mr. Hogan, you are bitch, but remember—

Okerlund: Gentlemen, Fred Blassie, I’m sorry gentlemen, I apologize, we are out of time.

Blassie: [Inaudible.]

[Video of match begins, as Hamzehee enters the arena.]

I begin *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh* with a pre-match interview featuring longtime commentator Mean Gene Okerlund interrogating the Iron Sheik and his handler/manager, the *white* “Ayatollah Freddie Blassie.” Mondak writes about this

wrestling warm-up ritual, stating “the nature of each competition between hero and villain is verbalized during pre-match interviews with the combatants, while non-verbal signals including wrestlers’ dress, mannerisms, tactics, and ethnic identification further clarify the nature of the wrestling drama” (140). Several aspects of this pre-match interview pop out: the white handler speaking *before* the Sheik; the refusal to correctly pronounce Iran; the foreshadowing of Sheik’s short championship reign. Most notable to me is the disregard for Sheik’s Farsi greeting and subsequent cutting off as it echoed how I felt as a kid about speaking Farsi in public. This silent voice of my father telling me, “*Engleesee harf bezan.*” *Speak English* to fit in. Seeing my Iranian-born father navigate his Americanness in ways like the Iron Sheik navigated the Americans around him helped to make my younger self shy away from the Persian culture I was born into.

In *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh* I staged autoethnographic performance to help articulate the overwhelmingly inarticulable that connects the universal experience of being in-between cultures with the specific circumstance of my in-betweenness. Negotiating the origins of identities, positionalities, and struggles within a body we are born into is a messy, complicated process. Like autoethnography, negotiating identity is a process where more answers always lead to exponentially more questions. Bochner and Ellis write autoethnography “depicts people struggling to overcome adversity” and displays a process of how people figure out “meaning of their struggles” (111). In “How is Home, a Performance Autoethnography in Four Parts,” Iranian-Iraqi Jewish-American scholar Desiree Yomtoob writes:

I grew up confused about double cultures and knowing that something was left behind.... More just erased, more like there was a step that I stood on that others could not see or would not acknowledge. I would say, “I am Persian, and then try to explain. My parents are from Iran,” to mostly blank faces that looked back at me. (458)

For myself, as Joshua/Kurosh, whenever asked about my heritage, I would say, “My father is from Iran.” The asker would usually say “*I-ran?*” No, I would say, Iran. “*Eye-ran?*” And then I would feel, *Iran!*

To create and stage *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh* for live audiences, I used aesthetic imagery of staged professional wrestling (like poses, ring sounds and stomps, common phrases), methodological excavation of autoethnographic embodiment (allowing parallels and conflict to emerge through textual experimentation), technical aspects and craft of spoken word (to hone, edit, and add impact), the potential for disassociation provided with digital video editing (to focus, distort, and illuminate), and a historical understanding of a specific strand of

the Persian diaspora (the hyphen between U.S.-Iran relations is where I find myself located). I merged these aspects to comment on the geopolitical and personal impacts of choices often made in 1980s professional wrestling performance. By articulating performance in this manner, I aim to turn staged professional wrestling tactics back on itself. Through staging wrestling's constructedness I inherently argue there is potential for its reconstruction.

***Legdropping the Iron Sheikh, Part 2: From Parts Unknown (1:40-3:25)***

They said wrestling was fake,  
But wrestling was not fake  
It's performance.

In this corner:  
From Parts Unknown, Iran,  
A former military man now serving tables in Tehrangeles under an  
easier to pronounce Americanized name,  
Q!

My father, Q, loved Hogan.  
*Babaeman*, Kayoumars Hamzehee, *ashegheh* Iron Sheikh *bood*.  
Hussein Khosrow Ali Vaziri—  
Greatest heel in history.  
Heat so hot he was *lavash* out the clay kiln.

To Q—who arrived in the U.S. at the height of Sheikh's fame  
And the heart of the Iranian Revolution—  
This twirly handlebar-mustached, sultan-shaved head, thick Farsi-  
speaking, Iranian flag-waving, hyper-masculine Shiite Muslim  
caricature  
Equaled American dream.

He was a bodyguard for the Shah (who was jealous of Vaziri's  
popularity).  
Like Kayoumars, Vaziri ran from Tehran in fear of his life.  
Here, Americans *shot* at him,  
*Spat* at him—  
But he loved America so much he performed the demonized exotic  
enemy inciting Hulkamania nationalism to prosperity, brother;  
While me and my *brother*

Watched.

Back then we bootlegged VHS matches from at the videostore.

Oh, a videostore is like a Chipotle, but for Netflix.

[Hamzehee goes to watch the match, responding to the action in Farsi. Then, Hamzehee as the Iron Sheik enters, belting the Iranian National Anthem.]

In this performance that articulates my past life, my father's real life, and the Sheik's wrestling life, what stands out to me is what I am *not* saying: the sound of stomps on the stage; the shreds are Persian rug that remain from other parts of *Burnt City*; what wrestling clichés like “from parts unknown” can represent to audiences who do not know; the characterization that emphasizes how Iran is portrayed by western media, the recognizable wrestling poses and actions I embody. As I watch this past version of myself performing about a past version of himself, I wonder who am I talking about/to: is it the Sheik? My father? Or my little brother? I know I'm talking about me, but I only see the word “me” once in this passage. Or am I talking about/to myself now through/with the people I describe? The Iron Sheik was a character played by Khosrow Vaziri. My father was a role performed by Kayoumars Hamzehee. How I choose to remember the past changes depending on if it's Joshua or Kurosh who is remembering it, who is performing it. Joshua often remembers the heel his father was. Kurosh sometimes remembers how his baba would buy wrestling action figures as a way of bonding, of forgetting the match his dad had with his step-mom the night before.

Growing up, other than my small Persian family in Los Angeles, the few depictions I saw of Persian men were much like the stereotypes of how the Iron Sheik was presented to me. Specifically, at home, I associated my alcoholic and physically abusive father with an unhinged wrestler. Sharing a home with him as a single father from ages one to seven—then from seven to thirteen with him, my eventual ex-step-mother, and younger brother—frequently felt like we were stuck in a steel cage wrestling match with no way out. I equated his actions, his violence, with Iran, as it was an Iranian who was doing it, and most of my Persian male examples acted similarly. As I grew older, I noticed the similarities of the Sheik's televised depiction with how I remembered my relationship with my father. I also keyed in on how their individual narratives paralleled each other as *they* grew older. When crafting *Legdropping*, I asked myself, was my own father a *heel*, or was I the *heel* for viewing him that way? I wondered where does the character of the Iron Sheik start, and the person who performed as him, Khosrow Vaziri, end? I also



pondered, where do the select memories of my father end, and the whole person he was, begin?

In the following section of *Legdropping the Iron Sheikh*, I catalogued over thirty hours of Iron Sheik text spoken in matches, interviews, and documentaries, and over my rehearsal process the text whittled down to under two minutes, coinciding with the edited video. While many processes go into constructing a text like this to fit within the context of a bigger production, I structured the text of this section using the *six C's of script construction*. The six C's are chopping, chunking, coding, cutting, checking, and chipping. *Chopping* is the first step to making a project like this manageable. After compiling my texts, I chop out everything I know I will not need. *Chunking* means isolating key pieces of information and tensions I know will provide visceral performance potential. *Coding* places the data remaining into overflowing thematic bins. *Cutting* selects what should stay and what should be discarded from those bins. Often, cutting can involve deciding among what to keep when there are duplicates of the same idea or when a bin does not have enough information to warrant being a pattern. During *checking*, scripters make hard choices, textual connections are threaded, and aesthetic options come into focus. *Chipping* removes unnecessary repetition, chisels content for efficiency, and tweaks choices to key in on connections and moments of resonance.

Chipping as refinement and polishing often occurs up to and including the days of performance. This section has taken many forms throughout its many lives, and the process of chipping has not ended. For example, in the 2019 version of *Burnt City* at LSU's HopKins Black Box Theatre, I embodied the Iron Sheik, his dialect and mannerisms, and treated the audience as if they were at a wrestling event. I *Ach-Ptew'd* at them and the U.S.A.! Following that show run, my technical crew gifted me an Iron Sheik action figure as a director's gift. In the 2020 version of the show—which traveled to the Patti Pace Performance Festival in Savannah, Georgia and was later presented for a five-show run at University of Northern Iowa's Interpreters Theatre—I disembodied the Sheik from myself, and placed his persona into that action figure, which I puppeted and voiced. Instead of embodying the character of the Iron Sheik, I hoped to contrast the childlike nature of play with the tone of misplaced Persian pride and masculine traditionalism.

***Legdropping the Iron Sheikh, Part 3: Ach-Ptew! (3:50-5:40)***

*Ey Irān, ey marz-e por gohar!*

I'm not American!

I'm from Tehran, Iran!

I spit on USA! *Ach-Ptew!* I suplex you!

I fuck the Hulk Hogan, make him humble.

Don't be jabroni, *baba*.  
I put him in camel clutch,  
Break his back,  
That *koskesh*.  
I sit on him—

No, that's not gay, I am Shiite I cannot do that!  
I'm first Middle Eastern 1968 I come to America, assistant coach for  
Olympic, first Iranian AAU champion five times.  
Thank you! Thank you.

Oh, I paid my dues.  
Old generation Hossein Khosrow Ali Vaziri.  
Nobody beat Mr. Bob Backlund,  
I put 'em in camel clutch!  
They said don't lose your belt to that Hollywood jabroni Hogan.  
But hand feed me I don't burn that hand, *nemeesoozam*.

Hogan came in locker room,  
We steroid, cocaine,  
He hug me, kiss me, say Sheiky baby I love you,  
I owe you one, do me this favor,  
Be American.  
Hogan lied ...  
America double-cross me.

I was first Iranian human being come to America  
Big Apple Madison Square Garden  
toughest roughest area  
and America double cross me.  
I am not brother,  
I am not jabroni.  
I was the Iron *Sheikh*."

[Sheik turns, sees himself in the match, then exits. Hamzehee returns,  
responding in Farsi to the climax of match. The match plays parallel  
to the Iranian National Anthem, belted by a male vocalist.]

The match ends with Hogan legdropping the Sheik, and, of course, “pride and joy has been restored to the American name as the Iranian has been defeated” (Rahmani 96). Yes, the focus of my performance here is the Iron Sheik, but it is notable that while Hogan is adjacently present, his curated nationalism by the WWE hovers ever-present. As if the Persianness of everyone involved—the Sheik, my father, and myself—only exists in opposition to Americanness. But the hyphen holding U.S.-Iran relations together is double-sided because, as Yomtoob describes in her own previously mentioned four-part Persian autoethnography, it is a “double culture” (458). This autoethnographic performance is a performance of borders and how I navigate and understand the faultlines my identities are placed upon. Gloria Anzaldúa reminds that those within culturally liminal spaces “continually walk out of one culture and into another” because we are in “all cultures at the same time” (77). When power and pride are involved as traditional tropes of masculinity in two or more of those cultures, and only unhealthy role models are consumed at home and on screen, an internal battle with cultural connection is a natural development.

As the Hogan-Sheik match reaches its climax on the x-ray’d video behind my performance, the audience hears a male-vocalized recording of the Iranian National Anthem to parallel the machismo showcased by the on-screen wrestling gladiators. In *Legdropping*, the audience ultimately hears four different versions of the National Anthem (female-led, male-led, sung by me as the Iron Sheik, hummed by me as myself). As the audiences for the live shows in Louisiana and Iowa were predominately white at predominately white institutions, most had no idea what they heard was the national anthem. My Persian attendees all recognized it. However, all attendees were able to recognize the familiarity and repetition of the beat and sounds. Not until collaging this creative essay did I realize I completely stopped consuming wrestling around eleven years old, after too many encounters with the Iron Sheik and having to act as a real-life referee.

Performing this show and collaging this essay have worked to teach me to connect back to the part of my Persian self I had left behind. I was able to admit, even with a complicated past and cast of characters that I grew up with, there are Persian parts of me that make me proud, like music, dancing, hospitality, physicality, food. By sharing this autoethnographic performance, I met new Persian friends in Baton Rouge and Cedar Falls, and understand more about my culture through our post-discussion chats in Farglish. I was able introduce audiences to a Persian culture they have only probably been exposed to with the Iron Sheik, *Shahs of Sunset*, and hyper-masculine terrorists in TV shows. While this performance did not bring me closer to my father, it did bring me closer to where both he and Vaziri came from, their first home: Iran. My performance and the process behind

constructing it also taught me much about why they left, as well as what they experienced in/from the United States of America.

***Legdropping the Iron Sheikh, Part 4: Heels and Faces (7:00-8:10)***

*Halla*, he calls himself the Sheik—

*K*—

Because Americans refused to pronounce the *kh* sound.

In his old age,

He struggles for money, waddles from generations of abuse,

His Persian pride is a volcano: American ex-wife left him, kids won't talk to him,

He blames

Others.

I wonder,

What happens to military veterans

Of *other* countries?

If governments

Give citizens PTSD?

If that trickles

Down

To childhood

Memories—

I wonder

If our heels

Make us

Who we are.

Or

If they're the faces

Of who

We

Become.

[Hamzehee hums Iranian National Anthem as match ends with slow motion/x-ray'd video of Sheik and Hogan's intertwined bodies.]

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