

Diverse Iranian Festival Coming to Toronto

Harbourfront, a True Toronto Landmark, Presents the Tirgan Festival

By Azim Ahmed

Hosting the Tirgan festival in July, a four-day event celebrating Iranian culture featuring over 50 performances in art, music, and dance, the Harbourfront Centre will be hopping with activity and excitement. It will be a place of musically pleasing sounds, mouth-watering scents, and colourful sights. It will feature some of the best in Iranian music, theatre, literature, dance and visual arts.

However, this is essentially how it is at Harbourfront all summer long.

With over 4,000 events year-round; indoor and outdoor, small and very large, a brief evening event to two weeks long; the Harbourfront Centre is at the heart of Toronto's cultural scene.

"The Harbourfront centre has its own audience. I am personally a regular visitor to Harbourfront Centre during festival season, and there are a lot of people like me," says Dr. Maria Sabaye Moghaddam, one of the Tirgan festival's Artistic Directors.

As such, the festival is confident it will attract many people from outside of the Iranian community as well, including tourists staying at the nearby hotels and those who simply visit the centre regularly knowing something exciting will be going on.

Harbourfront Centre: a Brief History

The land around Queen's Quay West and the Toronto harbour between Yonge Street and past York Street was first bought by the Federal Government in the early 1970's as a Crown Corporation (government-controlled company), similar to how the CBC is run. This was at least partially in response to complaints made to Ottawa by the City of Toronto on how a great sum of money was being spent on promoting Montreal through Expo '67 and the '76 Olympics, while Toronto was being largely neglected. In addition, Toronto's previously industrial harbour was in desperate need of revitalization and life.

The process of remaking the harbour into the activity-centre it is today was gradual, however. It was not 1982 that the old Queen's Quay Terminal was remodeled into a mix-used building of shops, restaurants, and offices. Exclusive residential condominiums that would later house Premier Mike Harris were erected around this development. Over time, the Harbourfront Centre grew and became more popular for visitors, particularly in the summertime. In 1991, it became a non-profit organization.

As a Crown Corporation, the Harbourfront Centre derives much of its funding from the Government, and has a unique corporate structure. "It has a corporate structure like any large business with a Board of Directors and a Management team, but all in a Government infrastructure," says Shane Gerrard, a Media Relations Officer at the Centre.

“While there are literally thousands of events a year at Harbourfront, all to different scales and uses, the one commonality is that they all promote cultural diversity through the arts to the community,” says Gerrard.

Many of these events are indeed represented by the multitude of community groups through the rich cultural mosaic that is Toronto, from workshops to food festivals to music concerts. According to Gerrard, if someone wants to organize an event for their culture, whether large or small, the Centre will do all it can to accommodate them.

Tirgan as the Larger Sequel to Under the Azure Dome Festival

That is essentially how the Iranian Canadian Centre for Arts and Culture (ICCAC), a committee Moghaddam is a part of, first started out in its relationship with the Harbourfront Centre.

Dr. Moghaddam migrated to Canada from Iran about 20 years ago, pursuing her Doctorate in Chemical Physics theory from the University of Toronto. She arrived at a time when the Iranian population was still young and growing in Canada. But her and a group of Iranian-Canadians who would eventually form ICCAC and the Board of Directors for Tirgan, saw the need to bring the growing community together. As such, they started organizing small events and lecture series’ at the University.

“We tried to maintain a very high quality of standards for these programs, and they were very well received. So we thought we could take it up one step further.”

This led the group to organize the successful March 2006 festival titled, ‘Under the Azure Dome’. This was a strong showcase of mainly local talent in the arts and music. The Tirgan festival hopes to bring the same artistic and cultural flavour, except on a much larger scale.

“The difference between the last festival and this is scale,” says Moghaddam. “In that, we had only two international artists, now a majority of artists are international, with 30-40 from Iran alone.”

“It’s really special for us to have a group work with us, and then move on to a larger template,” remarks Kerri MacDonald, an Artistic Associate in the Community and Educational Department at Harbourfront Centre. “It’s really great to be a part of that journey, to take the festival to the next level.”

While most events are straight-out rentals in which the Centre has little involvement, some of the larger festivals are co-produced by Harbourfront Centre, with Tirgan being one such example.

The Harbourfront staff is involved with collaborating with the Committee and actively being involved on the site, production, publicity, logistics and all the details that go into

organizing such a large scale festival. They also consult on the choice of artists and programming, but ultimately let the Committee decide on that.

“Obviously, our partners (the ICCAC committee) know the community and its artistic performances better than us. So we have a lot of trust in their decision making in terms of programming itself,” MacDonald says.

But while it is the Tirgan organizers with the first-hand knowledge and understanding of Iranian music, food, art and culture, it is the seasoned Harbourfront staff that knows how to run a successful large-scale event that runs throughout the weekend.

Taking place July 17th-20th, Tirgan festival organizers are expecting over 100,000 visitors. The festival honours Tirgan, an ancient Iranian celebration that has contributed to enriching Iranian culture over three millennia. The goal is to represent and showcase the many cultures within Iran; the dialects, the religions, and the regions. In fact, its theme is “Exploring Diversity”.

Selecting Artists and Funding Challenges

So what criteria are used in selecting artists and performers?

Dr. Maria Moghaddum responds, “The criteria is definitely high quality program, the most important thing to me. More or less, the only criteria!”

MacDonald, who has a theatre background and has been with Harbourfront for seven years, adds, “We want to ensure that we showcase professional artists here, and they have to be of a certain level and quality.”

But the festival attempts to give lesser known artists an opportunity as well.

“There’s the right venue and right time slot for emerging artists as well,” MacDonald explains. “We would never want to draw up a line of demarcation where we say ‘everybody with this much experience can come but you guys can’t’ because it’s really important to feature emerging artists as well, and definitely this festival is doing that.”

In addition, the festival will be moving past the “passive observation and spectator” platform and offer workshops and participatory options for adults, as well as cartoon workshops and puppeteers for youth and kids.

Like many large-scale ventures, funding is always a challenge. As of the beginning of June, according to the Official Tirgan website \$404,490 has been raised through sponsors, grants and other fundraisers, with \$245,510 still need to reach the festival’s \$650,000 goal.

“We still need money and are still fundraising,” Moghaddam admits. “We have a closing gala that we want to sell tickets for, it will be an amazing event. We have 150 artists, and people would have a chance to meet with them.”

The travel and accommodation costs of bringing in artists from around the world is perhaps the biggest obstacle. In addition to over 30 artists from Iran, there are people coming in from Europe, the U.S and other parts of Asia. Many local Canadian artists are also going to be on hand.

The Committee has applied for and received grants from the three levels of Government, but as always, it is usually not enough. Harbourfront is helping front the costs for production and programming.

With the scale of this festival being what it is, these obstacles are the reality of putting it together. Ultimately, the Tirgan festival will only be one of many large cultural exhibitions at the Harbourfront Centre this year, but it is one that is certainly highlighting and one that will be among its most popular.