

# “Iran: Hot Tea, Cool Conversations”

and Brenden Hamilton, filmmaker and citizen diplomat

Interview by Brian H. Appleton/www.zirzameen.com

Independent film maker recently released his latest film, two years in the making called “Iran: Hot Tea, Cool Conversations.” Directed by Brenden Hamilton and co-produced with Mehdi Ghafourifar.

Brenden is a very affable, soft spoken young man, a product of Northern California with an irresistibly endearing smile and a winning personality whose friendship immediately becomes apparent and desirable.

Q: Brenden, I loved your film. As someone who spent five years in Iran and loves Iran as much as I do, let me say that you did a totally awesome job in capturing and presenting what a wonderful people and culture Iran is in a way that was sensitive, subtle, and captivating. Your political insights were understated yet poignant and your obvious understanding of the Iranian culture is impressive. I am amazed that you could do this so effectively and well in only 6 weeks of shooting and never having been to Iran before.

Let’s start at the beginning. Where were you born Brenden?

A: I was born in SF California, Oct 7, 1980. Then we moved to Oakland briefly.

My parents divorced when I was at a young age after our move to Sonoma County so I grew up commuting between parents in San Francisco and Santa Rosa. I went to Analy High School in Sebastopol. Anna Lee was the daughter of one of the Sebastopol city fathers.

Q: What is your earliest childhood memory?

A: Vague memories of Oakland. From the earliest age I expressed an interest in telling stories. My mom used to tell me that I loved to make up stories from a very early age and I enjoyed telling my stories to an audience.

I watched many films and paid close attention to media growing up. I thought a lot about what went into making stories I watched on TV from a very early age.

Q: Was there one story or film in particular which had a big influence on you as a kid?

A: “Glory” (1989) was one of them. The film making process in itself was interesting to me but it was also a kind of an escape.

Q: I believe that entertainment is partially an escape from our present situations and realities. It is also a way to make a viewer experience or think about other realities and ideas right?

A: So, we live in a culture where conversations and discussions of philosophical ideas are not particularly encouraged. A documentary is a place where people can safely have different ideas presented to them and spend some time thinking about them. Because of the power and influence of the mass media, our impressions of other cultures are based on pre-packaged information presented as objective when in fact they may not be. Intuitively, I just didn’t trust the media portrayal of Iran. Due to media distortions, most Americans think of Iran as a flat desert full of terrorists. I believe the anti-intellectual climate of our culture stems from fear. This fear can be induced and managed by the media. Also the media having the loudest mouth insinuates that most of us, as the American public, are ignorant about foreign affairs, which is actually not the case. America is predominantly a nation of immigrants. Most Americans trace their roots to other countries and have an ongoing cultural liaison with them. This may be especially the case with first generation Americans who still have families in other countries and are in continual communication with them. There are also many Americans working abroad and so the point is that we have other sources of information against which to measure the veracity of the media.

Q: I agree totally with your diagnosis of Western media. Most Americans have the impression that Iran is Saudi Arabia and Vice Versa...not because they have a poor sense of geography but their perception suits their agenda. The West accuses Iran of gender apartheid and yet women vote, women work, women drive, women go to grad school which is not true of Saudi Arabia but Saudis allow US military bases and ARAMCO, while Iran has committed the sin of insisting on its own sovereignty much like we did in 1776.

What upset me the most about the going to war on Iraq was that at the time 99% of Americans only knew the name of one Iraqi; Saddam Hussein. That would be like letting George W. Bush represent all Americans.

When you read a book, there is no visual aspect to it other than some photos perhaps so you as a reader are forced to use your imagination; the imagery is suggested and the details are left to your mind’s eye. The greatness and the danger of the film media is that the director can portray reality exactly as he wants to, leaving little room for visualization.



A: I think that the mass media does in fact have a huge influence over what people think and talk about. That is why I believe so firmly in citizen diplomacy because each one of us can represent our country and perhaps in a more accurate way than a government representative can, as well as going beyond nationalism and discovering our shared humanity. As a citizen and not a government or corporate representative I have a different agenda. What citizens of every country share an interest in, is usually the same thing...having friends, a decent career, healthy children, peace... When our government or our media speaks about American interests abroad, they are not necessarily speaking about the average American’s interests nor about what is in the best interests of the citizens of another country; they are often speaking about what is best for American corporations or special interest groups.

Q: The media has us believing that Israelis are 100% war hawks in favor of attacking Iran when we know in fact that is not the case and there are peace advocates in Israel who protest this aggression and the expanding of settlements on occupied Arab land. Also interestingly enough American Jews are the biggest critics of Zionism, a fact most Americans are unaware of.

A: This is a passionate topic and I’m sure there are people on both sides of these issues. We haven’t been focusing on this area. One of the members of the former New College faculty, Peter Gable writes for the Jewish magazine and interfaith movement Tikkun and I believe he is a Jewish pro Palestinian advocate.



Brian Hanson

My dad Martin worked at New College in SF for 35 years as a VP for a long time and eventually President. My mom was a New College graduate and a peace activist. She moved here from Florida and became very active in American Indian rights. She founded an organization called “Weaving for Freedom” which helped to give women on the Big Mountain Indian Reservation in Arizona some income. She helped to market their weaving to a large marketplace while simultaneously broadcasting their plight to the public.

My mom was more or less adopted into the Big Mountain community. She was one of a very few outsiders allowed to experience the Sun Dance ritual of the Navajo. I spent time on the reservation and was greatly influenced not only by her enthusiasm for social justice but also by her entrepreneurial ability as I watched her literally grow that business from a very small local operation with a trading post to a large international one. I think that she gave me the courage to become an independent filmmaker. My mom was an advocate for the Navajo. There had been a long, long history of pressure from the BIA as well as private industry to relocate this tribe ever since it was discovered that there were significant coal deposits under the reser-



Tales From The Zirzameen by Brian Hanson Appleton aka Rasool Aryadust Dorrance Publishing Company copyright 2007; available for purchase at [www.dorrancebookstore.com](http://www.dorrancebookstore.com) or on his website at [www.zirzameen.com](http://www.zirzameen.com)

Tales from the Zirzameen reflects on Iranian culture and people as well as the American expatriate society there in the 1970s. The short stories relate how the author became assimilated there, including his acting in Iranian films, his conversion to Islam, and he shares his experiences leading up to and during the revolution and four months into its aftermath. Despite the circumstances under which he left the country-including being taken hostage for a time-the author celebrates the hospitality and rich culture of the Iranian people. He was welcomed warmly into their society and came to appreciate the sincerity and kindness that characterized the people he met. It also celebrates the exceptional individuals who comprise the Iranian family which adopted him as one of their own and the depths of friendship and heroism of certain individuals during the revolution who put themselves at great risk in order to rescue him. It is hoped that placing the people of Iran in greater historical context might familiarize the American people with this ancient culture, showing the human faces that lie behind the current political propaganda. The objective is peace and recognition of our common humanity.

### About the author:

Brian Hanson Appleton aka Rasool Aryadust was born in Tokyo, Japan and grew up in Greece and Italy as a self described “army brat.” As an adult, he lived in Iran for five years before, during and after the revolution of 1979. Prior to working

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My mom, Arlene also had a program called: “The Garden Project” which still exists and teaches prisoners how to garden. It is also called horticulture therapy. It gives prisoners a useful skill and some empowerment. While on the reservation I can remember wanting so much to be home watching TV and playing basketball. It was only much later that I realized what an incredible experience it had been and how much it influenced my life.

Q: Your mom sounds like she was quite courageous, intelligent and had a passion for social justice. I am sorry that she met her demise five years ago and that I will never have the pleasure of meeting her.

A: I am touched that you would honor my mother in this interview.

Q: Why Iran and what was your purpose for making this film? Your first film “Bound” was about Robert Johnson so this one about Iran is kind of a radical departure. Were sports your first love?

A: Yeah, “Hoop Dreams” (1994) was kind of the inspiration for that film. “Bound” picks up where “Hoop Dreams” leaves off; the character made it to college in “Hoop Dreams” and in “Bound” the film begins following Robert Johnson in his senior year of college attempting to both graduate and get drafted into the NBA. We were filming “Bound” at the time of March Madness and America’s “shock and awe” bombing of Iraq. This kind of eclipsed our film as far as relevance. We did a few film festivals and had a great opening at the Roxy, which was very exciting. The DVD is coming out soon.

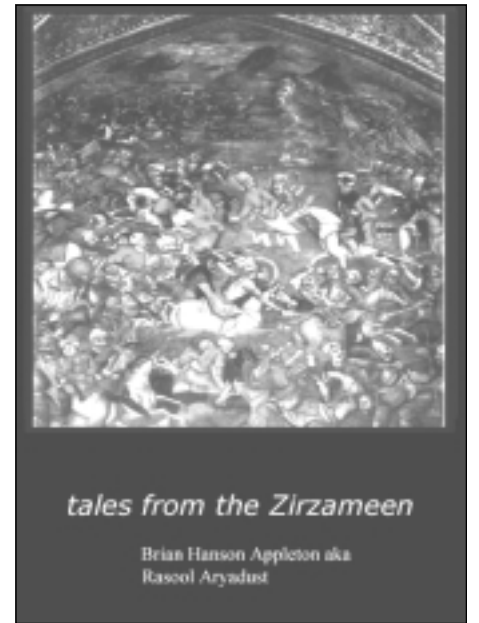
The invasion of Iraq definitely grabbed my attention. I was always interested in politics.

I thought Iran would be next. I had learned in public high school about how the opposing side is dehumanized in order to make war possible, in order to get popular support for it, especially using the fear factor which accompanies demonization. I wanted to see Iran for myself and bring back a real perspective for the American people.

Jerry Dekker taught some courses on Iran at New College which I attended and I also took a course there about Middle Eastern religions that talked about Iran. Plus my dad also talked a lot about it and wanted to go to Iran. The politics unfolding about Iran intrigued me including the mystery of Iran and what it was really going to be like. While I was filming in Iran, I was so caught up

# Tales From The Zirzameen

by Brian Hanson



there, he attained a bachelor of arts degree in anthropology from George Washington University, graduating Phi Beta Kappa. He also earned his TEFOL certification from Georgetown University and most recently his master of arts degree from the International University of Fundamental Studies Oxford Educational Network, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation. In November of 2008, he received his investiture into the Sovereign Orthodox Order of Saint John Hospitaller, Knights of Jerusalem. The author currently resides in Northern California with his wife Laura and he is father of Luke and Alex. He is author of numerous published magazine articles. Links to them can be found on his website: [www.zirzameen.com](http://www.zirzameen.com)

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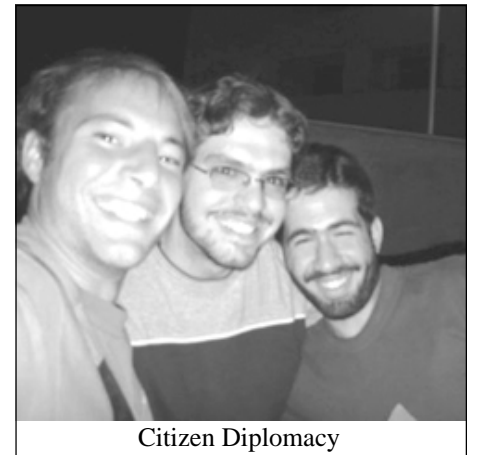
Jerry had spoken highly of Iran and said it would be possible to go to Iran and film there. So I was really curious about the so-called “Axis of Evil” and wanted to see it for myself.

Q: Did you plan from the start to make the film a series of interviews or did that just kind of evolve as you went?

A: It evolved as I went. I had no idea what to expect about how receptive Iranians were going to be about being filmed and interviewed.

I watched the D.A. Pennebaker film “Don’t Look Back” (1967) starring Bob Dylan. I used Pennebaker’s real intimate style. His camera work liberates the camera from convention. Free hand held, personal, and intimate, almost like one on one.

Q: You went to film school?



Citizen Diplomacy

A: I took ROP video courses in High School and then took additional filmmaking courses at Long Beach. I graduated from New College of California with a Bachelor of Arts in Humanities with concentration in Film/History in 2007. My film courses were good for learning techniques and processes. But I learned most about filming through hands on experiences.

Q: When did you shoot this film and how long did it take?

A: I shot the film in 2006 and it took a couple of years to complete it, including all the editing, narrations... At first I had a rather didactic segment about going into a culture shock upon my return home and the 24-hour news cycle. What I mean by 24-hour news cycle is the way in which old news goes stale in 24 hours and people can’t remember what happened last week let alone one, five, or 100 years ago. The media seldom puts anything into historical perspective so people may not have a good idea of why cer-

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