

ARTS & LETTERS PREMIERE—SAFAHAN MUSIC BAND

By: David Smith

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University launched the 2008-2009 Arts and Letters Series Sept. 24 with the performance of Safahan, an award-winning, traditional Iranian music band.

The all-female, seven-member group from Esfahan, Iran took center-stage at the Willie Miller Instructional Center Auditorium for just over an hour as part of its first tour of the U.S.

And the round of applause afterward marked the end of the week-long Passport to Persia Week, an extension of the Iranian-American Society's "cultural outreaches," said Dr. Linda Straubel, Chair of ERAU's Arts and Letters Committee.

"I hope you enjoy these beautiful pictures of Esfahan, the home of Safahan," Dr. Straubel said of the slide-show display that preceded the main attraction. Among "Iran's Historic Sites," as the show was titled, were photo-graphs of various monuments built in the Safavid Era during the 16th to 18th Centuries. The cathedrals, mosques, and other structures included a master bridge constructed of 33 miniature bridges.

Mrs. Manous Richey, a member of the Iranian-American Society, listed some of Safahan's achievements as she introduced them. Last year the band, which formed in 2003, won an award at the World Music Festival in Dubai.

Unfortunately for Safahan's domestic ambitions, the regime in Iran has necessitated global tours due to regulations that have for years dictated what kind of audiences the women are allowed to perform for.

Sustained applause echoed Mrs. Richey's introduction of each member as they gathered in an eight-chair, half-circle, donned in traditional gold and maroon garbs. The lead singer wore a light-purple version of the same, which resembled a full-length dress.

Despite the novelty of the centuries-old instruments for many in attendance, the audience seemed at home amid a mix of contagious rhythms, choral singing, and musical solos.

Just before intermission, an Indian gentleman shared his appreciation of Safahan's version of a tune that re-minded him of home.

After the break, the women continued to serenade the audience with the daf, a circular, hollow drum made with lamb or goat skin; the ney, a bamboo flute; the santour, a stringed, xylophone-esque, wooden instrument played with mallets; the setar, a four-string musical ancestor of the banjo and guitar; the tar, a 6-string instrument similar to the setar; and the tombak, a king's-cup-shaped drum carved from solid mulberry wood.

As the show wound down, the group's director, Sheikbahaei Hamid, a world-class maestro of the daf, joined for the final number. His ex-tended daf solo stimulated most of the audience to clap along in rhythm, as they had done intermittently through-out.

When the final note sounded, the roar of a standing ovation flooded the room for no less than a minute.

“Turn-out was good,” Dr. Straubel said. She added that events like these are collaborative efforts, by the local Iranian-American community and other organizations, to demonstrate that the difficulties between the governments of the U.S. and Iran aren’t caused by either’s citizens.

Event organizers displayed Safahan’s CDs and instruments in the lobby. They also distributed a program which included a brief bio of the group, along with its website, www.safamusic.ir.

The week-long celebration of Persian~Iranian culture was co-sponsored by Embry-Riddle, along with Daytona State College, Bethune-Cookman University and many corporate sponsors. It was organized by the Ancient Persia ~ Modern Iran Lecture Series Committee.