

Reza's story, first retold in the nonfiction narrative *American Wings, Iranian Roots*, embodies multiple opportunities for cinematic vision.

Thematic focal points include:

1. The Hero's Journey
2. The Muhammad Ali v. Frazier Tribology
3. Exploring political analogies – “The Crucible”

The value of Reza Abedi's life is not only redefined on the “vast page of history” but reflected within the most critically misunderstood event of contemporary human experience—the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The arch of Reza's journey unfolds against the impact of world-altering events. After leading bloody battles in the 1979 Iranian Revolution and witnessing the carnage of the Iran-Iraq War, Reza desires a fate beyond Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran.

Born in a humble family, Reza knows his only chance to escape depends on his elite wrestling skills. In Iran, the heroic wrestlers are known as The Pahlavan—the ancient warriors. Somehow, Reza must make this Team of Champions to travel outside of Iran.

Through sheer grit and sacrifice, Reza stands on the First Place platform celebrated as the best wrestler in the world--his legacy recorded as the Iranian National Anthem plays at the International World Championship in 1982.

But, it was not the Championship he desired.

On the last night, Reza grips his gold medal desperately hoping the American wrestlers will help him escape—but knowing his 13 year-old brother, locked in Khomeini's prison, will pay with his life for his humiliating defection. Struggling to choose between his own freedom and the revenge killing of his family, Reza's amazing journey begins.

Is his life more valuable than that of his brother's? Reza knows his father, mother and 8 other siblings will be called in by SAVAK to be questioned, possibly tortured and maybe killed. Even if the American wrestlers come through, Reza knows he will be hunted by the Revolutionary Guard.

At a tender age, Reza mourns the loss of a country he longer recognizes; yet, he's driven to control his fate. The truth of everything he's ever known—pride, honor, loyalty and love—lay shattered. It is only a mythological hero's journey that will dare him to trust the Americans, fight to live and return in an attempt to rescue his family.

Although this is a story about becoming a champion, it is first and foremost the story of a man who, oppressed and terrorized, embarks on a journey of courage.

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Each of these thematic visions knit Reza's story together with dramatic intention.

As a short film, a full-length project, episodes or trilogy, this story has endless possibilities.

I have included an overview below and will discuss the ‘flushed out’ sketch of each if you have extended interest.

1. The Hero's Journey

Identified by the American scholar Joseph Campbell, the Hero faces seemingly insurmountable challenges and achieves great deeds. Although the pattern will vary, the hero's external and internal journey follows a similar prototype.

Reza's story retold in the stages of the Hero's Journey:

1. The ordinary world: Reza is an ordinary kid born into a working class family of 10 children in Kermanshah in 1960s.
2. The call to adventure: In his teens, Reza is forced into bloody battle of the 1979 Revolution.
3. Refusal of the call: Unlike many of his friends and neighbors, he questions the promises made by the Ayatollah Khomeini. His participation in the street battles of the Revolution are for the survival of his family.
4. Meeting with the mentor: Both Reza's father and a favorite teacher at school mentor Reza.
5. Crossing the threshold: As is expected of young men his age, he is forced to join the Air Force to fight Iraq. A gifted wrestler, he knows his only chance to defect is to make the National Wrestling Team and escape when they travel to another country to compete.
6. Tests, allies and enemies: Reza has to make the team by beating a wrestler of superior skill who has beaten Reza in a previous tournament. He is faced with war, death and the imprisonment of his 13 year-old brother, Houshang.
7. The ordeal: Reza makes the team and travels to Venezuela to compete. He tells no one of his plan to escape. He notices a teammate talking to American wrestlers and approaches the teammate in the shower. He says he wants to defect too. The teammate tells him of the danger and reminds him of Houshang.
8. The reward: Reza and 3 other teammates, including his best friend whose father is a personal body guard for Khomeini, escape. After 6 months of near starvation in the streets of Venezuela, the wrestlers lie to the Iranian Embassy and ask for a plane ticket to Iran (knowing they would need to change plans in Europe). Barely escaping the Revolutionary Guard, they find refuge in Spain. Here, they hold an international press conference and are among the first to tell of the broken promises of the Iranian Revolution. They apply for American Visa and are admitted into the U.S. Reza qualifies for a College Scholarship as a wrestler.

9. The road back: Settled in America, Reza is on his way to earning his college degree and fulfilling his dream to become a teacher. He gets a call from his younger sister—his ailing father and 3 younger sisters have been smuggled from Iran to Istanbul. In Istanbul, the smugglers stole their money and left them. Reza’s sister says “We cannot be young girls here without money. We will be sold.”
10. The resurrection: Reza must risk everything he has sacrificed and worked for in order to return. He must falsify documents to travel and rescue his family. Stopped at a checkpoint, the sisters and his father are taken to a refugee center in Germany. Once they are discovered to be Iranians, they will be sent back to Iran. Reza helps them escape and carries them through the snow along mountain paths
11. Return with the elixir: Reza and his family make their way to freedom in Europe.

A hero’s story is timeless for it strengthens the pillars that make us human. Reza’s journey so authentically follows the pattern of a hero’s journey that it unfolds endless possibilities for exploration.

2. The Muhammad Ali v. Frazier tribology

“With the possible exception of David vs. Goliath, the greatest rivalry in the history of individual human combat was the three-fight trilogy staged by Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier from 1971-75. It began as the embodiment of the culture war taking place at that time in America, and it evolved into a conflict in the ring that ennobled both gladiators and defined the essence of a brutal sport.” By Greg Logan NewsDay 2016

The parallel between Reza’s journey and the Ali v. Frazier Trilogy is natural. The timeline of the boxing trilogy (1971-1975) serves to “set the table” with regard to Reza’s journey and its thematic connection to the epic third boxing match.

Wrestling is the oldest sport known to mankind, first noted in the Old Testament Genesis 32:22-32. The Preface to Reza’s story reads:

So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.

Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.”

But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

The man asked him, “What is your name?”

“Jacob,” he answered.

Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.”

Reza would not know this story. He would live it.

The use of the boxing trilogy to launch Reza's story is etched as follows:

Match 1: Reza's father brought home a TV for the family to watch the first boxing match. This is the first TV show Reza would watch. Reza fell from the roof when trying to adjust the antenna. This scene will foreshadow the "Middle East v. America" battle to come as well as establish Reza's fascination with the will of gladiators. Moreover, it will create the foundation for Reza's willingness to risk his safety—for both something he wants and for the needs of his family. Ali loses this match and Reza watches his first hero fall. Reza will also see his hero rise to fight again as will be the theme woven throughout Reza's story.

Match 2: The second match was in 1974. Neither Ali nor Frazier enter the ring as a champion; however, it sets up the epic third match the "Thrilla in Manila". In Iran in 1974, Shah ruled and was bringing the White Revolution to the rural areas. The White Revolution included health care, education, women's rights, land ownership and increased religious freedoms.

Within these changes, is an undercurrent of backlash from the both the fundamentally devout Islamic Mullahs and those of significant wealth.

Although swirling about Reza and his humble family, in Reza's young world, he is just a serious student who is quickly developing his natural gifts as a wrestler.

Match 3: The "Thrilla in Manila" brought two great warriors as close to death as a living man can be without becoming a corpse, Ali later saying "closest thing to dying that I know of". Beyond the bloody pounding of the fight, this match's place is etched in history not as a sporting event, but as testament of will.

During the fight, Ali said to Frazier "They said you were through Joe," to which Frazier responded, "They lied."

When Frazier's trainer, Futch, chose to end the fight before the final round, he may have saved Frazier's life, but he condemned Frazier. Frazier would never again seriously compete and spent his remaining years drifting between bitterness and redemption. Frazier "died" when he quit.

The concept that "to quit" is "to die" embodies Reza's life. This theme is introduced in the first pages of the narrative, reflected throughout and magnified in the final scene when Reza carries his dying father through the smuggler's snow-covered mountain path.

Cementing the concept occurs when Reza and his cousin, Farid, discuss Reza's match at his first National Tournament. At age 13, Reza qualifies to compete in the elite National tournament. Reza, weak from cutting weight, collapses on the 'weigh-in' scale and his brother carries him to the steam room to bring him back to consciousness. Battling, Reza makes it to the championship round, but on National TV, he suffers a humiliating defeat. (Years later, the wrestler who defeats Reza in this tournament, is the same wrestler who Reza needs to beat to make the International Team).

When he returns home, Reza and his cousin Farid lay on the rooftop and reflect on Reza's loss. Farid helps Reza to understand the connection between his loss and epic third boxing match between Ali and Frazier. When Reza expresses his shame and desire to quit because "the whole

world just saw him get beat like a goat with a club,” Farid reminds Reza of the 3rd Ali v Frazier match. Reza protests by saying “that makes him feel more like a loser.” However, Farid reminds Reza of the ways of the ancient Iranian warriors—The Pahlavan. Reza did not quit, unlike Frazier, Farid says. Reza stayed and battled.

Reza lets “warm tears make their way down his cheeks” and says, “I wanted to make the team. To travel. To see the world. That was my only chance.”

“No Reza,” Farid says. “That was your first chance.”

Although the “Thrilla in Manila” occurs in 1975, a few years before the beginnings of unrest in Iran, the connections lend seamless opportunities.

3. “The Crucible”

In the unsettling era of Trumpism, the critical need to understand the layers of the American-Iranian relationship cannot be understated.

Moreover, the lazy comparison of Trump (& most ‘unhinged’ leaders) to Hitler misses acute similarities to Ayatollah Khamenei’s rise to power. I believe this is significantly due to lack of knowledge of Middle Eastern history; whereas the academic study of and proliferation of World War II-themed movies gives a comfort level to an “evil-leader-must-be-Hitler” judgment.

As every era and every social movement/disruption will be unique, similar patterns can be used as a looking glass. In 1953, playwright Arthur Miller created an analogy between McCarthy’s prosecution of accused communists to the Salem Witch Trials of the 1600s. Miller’s play *The Crucible* expressed his distaste for the paranoia of his era. “I am not sure what *The Crucible* is telling people now, but I know that its paranoid center is still pumping out the same darkly attractive warning that it did in the fifties.”

Allow me a very broad brush explaining events leading the Iranian Revolution and its aftermath.

Ayatollah Khomeini, a relatively unknown cleric, was exiled from Iran in 1963 by Shah for speaking out against Shah’s White Revolution. The White Revolution opened educational, leadership, health care and land-ownership opportunities to women and the poorer classes. It also allowed for increased religious tolerance.

The rich Iranians and devout Islamic Mullah’s did not like the changes. Additionally, as Shah’s power followed the 1953 U.S and British led coup “Operation Ajax” of democratically elected Dr. Mohammed Mossadegh, many Iranians did not recognize Shah as their leader. Instead, despite the changes Shah brought to the country, many Iranians viewed Shah as a “Puppet for the West.”

Ayatollah Khomeini exploited the fears of Iranians in that they were losing their identity to the West, and that Shah stole oil revenues that rightfully belonged to every Iranian citizen. He stoked the “fear of the outsider” and “promise of deserved riches” to promote his rise to power, but the vision he sold to the citizens never happened. The wealth of the country re-shifted back to the

elite few and he reimaged Iran into the conflicted society we see today. Similarly, Trump used “fear of others” and “promise of deserved riches” to rise to power.

With the vision herein cast, I believe an equally courageous and creative mind will make such connections of human nature, greed and fear.

I look forward to connecting with you.

Best,
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