

weekender.

## COVER STORY



**IN TRAINING:**  
The dancers for  
Breathe, Woman!  
during rehearsals.

## TO FLEE AND

A middle-eastern tale of persecution and exodus that ended happily in Ballarat has inspired a sell-out dance performance that gives new life to a woman's voice, writes Dellaram Vreeland.

**I**T WAS the spring of 1979. The Shah had been overthrown and the Grand Ayatollah Khomeini had already seen his rise to power.

It was clear to Pari Khadem that danger was lurking. She was a Baha'i, a member of Iran's largest non-Muslim religion whose adherents had been persecuted since the faith's inception in 1844.

Under the rule of the Ayatollah, the situation would inevitably worsen for all Iran's Baha'is. The faith's modern, peaceful teachings challenged the conservative, reactionary clergy, who would mount a program of vicious persecution.

Already, Baha'i homes were being robbed and set on fire. With two young children and a newborn, Pari was frightened for her family's well-being.

"We were afraid and we wanted to leave, but my mother said she would not go and, if anybody wanted to come to our house,

they would first have to kill her and then burn the house," Pari recalled.

"We couldn't leave her alone, so we stayed."

It wasn't long before the attacks on the Baha'is intensified and, soon, the Khadems had no choice but to leave their native land.

It was Pari's husband, Ghodrat, who organised the family's departure. With the repeated arson attacks, he immediately sent his family to Spain before selling all their belongings at greatly reduced prices, and leaving to join them a couple of months later.

"We were out for dinner one night when our friends, who were visiting from Spain, told my husband they would take us back with them so we would be protected from harm," Pari said.

"My husband, who wanted us to leave Iran, accepted her offer and, within one



Ghodrat and Pari Khadem in Iran with their two daughters Elham (top) and Mojgan (bottom).

week, we bought our plane tickets, packed two suitcases, left and never returned.

"We left everything behind us. Everything. All our possessions and our close friends. It was hard."

The Khadems lived in Spain for three years before they could secure visas and move to Australia in 1981. Pari said that having to move to Spain and then to Australia was harder than having to leave Iran.

"We didn't know the language or the culture," she said.

"When we came to Australia, again we had to learn a new language, get used to a new country and a new culture and we had no work. It was very difficult to adjust."

Pari Khadem is my grandmother and her refugee story was one of the Ballarat stories which inspired the recent contemporary dance project Breathe, Woman!

After two sellout performances in Ballarat, Breathe, Woman! was selected from 35 regional arts projects across Victoria and staged at the Victorian College of the Arts last weekend.

Choreographed by Shermaine Heng, the dance explored the push and pull between external forces and the individual, as well