

# In the name of the father

Hani Farsi — in his capacity as philanthropist, arts patron, restaurateur, executive movie producer, hotelier and CEO of his family's London-based investment enterprise, Corniche Group — is fuelled by many things: compassion, enterprise, creative zeal and an unquenchable fervour for the power of storytelling, among others. But Farsi puts his multifaceted success down to the wholly edifying influence of one man, he tells Nick Scott.

photographs by **luke carby**

“A child’s education,” they say, “begins at home.” It’s a rather Pecksniffian adage, but Hani Farsi is a living testimony to its perspicacity. “My father and I didn’t talk about sport when I was a child,” he tells *The Rake* of his extraordinary childhood in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. “We’d talk about what Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann did for Paris as a planner, or the difference between an Ottoman minaret and a Mamluk minaret, or why Henry Moore was a genius. I was never bored — I loved it. It seeped into my mind. To this day, it all affects the way I see the world, it affects what projects I go into, and it affects how I approach them.”

It’s a crisp late-winter morning, and Farsi has invited *The Rake* to his Mayfair office — more of a museum, really, filled as it is with a collection of paraphernalia that testifies to its owner’s diverse interests and remarkable life to date. You won’t often find Baron Haussmann and *Saturday Night Fever* both referenced in the same profile feature, but here it’s justified, as Farsi is the proud owner of the white suit worn by John Travolta in the 1977 disco-themed celluloid fondue. Next to it are John Lennon’s original teashades, behind which a life-size photo of the Beatle’s face, mid-gurn, has been placed mischievously.

Elsewhere, the walls are filled with classic movie posters, a montage created from the actual deck of tarot cards featured in *Live and Let Die* (next to a printed script of the scene in which they feature), as well as a Banksy original, among other curios. Later, Farsi would pull the original script for the first *Star Wars* movie from a desk drawer, thus reducing myself and *The Rake*’s founder Wei Koh to the level of tearfully credulous pilgrims viewing the Shroud of Turin. “It’s a leveller,” he says of the rich pop-cultural vault that sits on the first floor of Corniche’s Mayfair HQ. “Bankers and lawyers love it, entertainment people, actors, film producers love it — everyone who visits me here loves it.”

Head off into a room to the right and, amongst even more memorabilia — coffee-table tomes, photos of Farsi with Presidents Carter and Clinton, the first £10 note that one of his restaurants took, fashioned into an origami butterfly — is the main event: a large portrait by contemporary British painter Jonathan Yeo, of the learned patriarch who made Farsi’s childhood domicile such an edifying place in which to grow up. Dr. Mohammed Said Farsi was a former Lord Mayor of Jeddah, and a man of such aesthetic integrity that he travelled the world to meet with sculptors, painters and musicians before replanning the city according to his own meticulously constructed vision.

To say that his donnish father had a big influence on the younger Farsi would be a woeful understatement. Farsi’s eyes

visibly coruscate with pride as he describes the sheer integrity and acumen with which his father approached his work. “[One year after] he became Mayor in 1972, the Yom Kippur War and the resulting embargo had led to the price of oil going up to USD40 a barrel, which in turn led to the first-ever boom in Saudi Arabia,” he says. “So, the money he had to spend on the city increased tenfold. But he knew this wouldn’t last forever, so when he was given a budget to build himself an office befitting the Mayor of the city, he decided, instead, to put that money into surfacing the roads and planning what we now have as the infrastructure — ‘the city’s main arteries’, as he’d call it — of Jeddah.

“He just knew that if he did not make this happen, then construction of the city would be thwarted. So our house became his office. This meant that, as a child, I grew up seeing a city being planned in the family home — [I came across] press conferences, architects, artists... The discussions were always about function, beautification and so on, and this definitely became a part of my subconscious. Adding to this, my father was a great [art] collector.”

Illuminating as Farsi’s childhood might have been, his extraordinary life journey began in earnest when he left the Middle East at the age of 15 to attend an Episcopalian school in the northwest of Connecticut. The separation from his family was traumatic, and not just for Farsi. “My father said to me, ‘You don’t know what a sacrifice it is for me to send you away — you’re my only child!’” he says. “Back then, I didn’t know what he was talking about, but now that I’m a father, I understand what a sacrifice it was. It’s another reason that I love him — very much. I hope that one day my kids can look up to me even half as much as I do to him.”

As well as the distance from his childhood domicile, there was the culture shock to deal with. “The day that I was dropped off was the first time I’d set eyes on the school,” he recalls. “This was in 1983. It looked like it hadn’t changed since 1952 — cars and fashion included. I was homesick, I was culturally sick — I felt that I was completely disconnected to everything I knew. There were no phones, and mail to and from Saudi Arabia moved at about the speed it did during the American Civil War. I didn’t read or write English. I was the only Muslim there — or for a 100-mile radius, at least — and became friends with the only Jewish kid.”

It sounds onerous, especially for an adolescent. Does he wish it had been different? “No way. It taught me independence, self-reliance, the ability to move more effortlessly between different worlds. It helped me not to let my entire identity be tied up with my father’s position, wealth or power — these things that can just



Films that Farsi has executive produced include: (clockwise from top) *The Time that Remains* (2009), starring Saleh Bakri (image below, far right) and Samar Tanus (middle); *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012); and *The Patience Stone* (2012).



home here gives me strength. Besides, I knew that if I ever went back to Saudi Arabia, I'd forever just be the son of Mohammed Said Farsi — an honour, but I'd never know if what I achieved was really my achievement."

What he would go on to attain in the English capital is nothing short of remarkable. Farsi's next career move was prompted by what he describes as his "great belief in the power of storytelling to change people, as well as entertain them". As a result of this, Farsi loved theatre very much and attended as many plays as he could when he arrived in London. One of these was a production of David Mamet's, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, which ran in a tiny theatre called Donmar Warehouse. Farsi recalls, "It was very low-budget, but it was truly stunning, from the opening scene onwards. I was mesmerised. So, when I found out [the theatre] was closing due to lack of budget, I arranged to meet the people behind it. The artistic director was a young guy around my age called Sam Mendes. We hit it off and became good friends."

That man, who would go on to direct films including *American Beauty*, *Skyfall* and *Revolutionary Road*, explained to Farsi the figures necessary to keep the play open, to which Farsi replied, "OK, this will be my gift to London. I'll give you the money on the condition that you don't release my name." He explained to Mendes at the time, "The phrase 'young Saudi businessman' will turn into headlines that read 'young rich Arab'. It might detract from you, and from further funding you can get. Besides, I want to keep a low profile. Let's keep it anonymous." Farsi went on to become a member of Donmar Warehouse's board of directors. With Farsi's backing, the same company went on to produce the play that spawned a thousand column inches and revived

come and go — and my life became non-reliant on the things that had traditionally made it easier. In fact, I still had three very happy years there, and I'm now a trustee of that school."

After high school, Farsi made the short move south, to continue his studies at the American University in Washington DC, from which he'd eventually graduate with a master's degree in international affairs. Perhaps the most formative year of this spell, though, came during some time out of his studies. "I went to work for Amnesty International for a year," he says. "This was during the time of the First Gulf War. [My work] was based in Capitol Hill, and I moved between the House of Representatives, the Senate, the White House, the State Department and various embassies. But far more enlightening than meeting the politicians was meeting the prisoners of conscience, who would often come and talk to us. Hearing their stories was fascinating — those letter-writing campaigns really can lead to people's freedom. Along with my father's example, my year at Amnesty had a huge impact on me and how I went on to establish myself."

Farsi would spend seven years altogether in DC before moving to what is now his native London. "I'd been coming here since the '70s, and I'd always liked what England stands for. It's culturally rich and, most importantly, it's cosmopolitan — I always want to feel that, when I walk into a room, I'm not dominated by one nationality. The fact that people from all backgrounds feel at

Donmar's profile — David Hare's *The Blue Room* with Nicole Kidman, whose performance was later memorably described in *The Daily Telegraph* as "pure theatrical Viagra".

Farsi continued to be involved in theatre productions, including the stage version of *Closer* — later made into a film starring Natalie Portman, Jude Law, Clive Owen and Julia Roberts — before he ventured into movies. Projects he has executive produced include 2012's super-smart thriller *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*; 2009's charting of the creation of the State of Israel, *The Time That Remains*; 2013's profile of an Afghan media organisation, *The Network*; and 2012's *The Patience Stone*, an offbeat war film set in Kabul, whose title is drawn from an apocalyptic scenario in Persian folklore. "I pick things mainly on the basis of the message that the story is trying to convey, and how much I believe in the vision of the director," he explains.

At the time of writing, Farsi is about to head to the Sundance Film Festival, where two more movies that he's executive produced will show. One is *We Are the Giant*, a documentary that profiles seven activists and their connection to different uprisings of the Arab Spring. "It explores what makes someone who's not necessarily a revolutionary — perhaps a student or a teacher or housewife — one day say, 'Enough is enough. There's no dignity here. I'm going to stand up and fight,'" explains Farsi. "There's a part of me that would love to make a great comedy, but there're thousands of other people who can do this. One of the ways to bring about change is to hold up a mirror, and film is a very good way of doing that."

The other is *20,000 Days on Earth* — a fictionalised day-in-the-life examination of Nick Cave, starring the Australian polymath himself, which won editing and directing awards in the World Cinema Documentary category at the film festival held in Park City, Utah. "It's a beautiful film," says Farsi today. "Nick himself is in every single shot — the narrative dives into what the creative process is, what makes him want to sit down and write music and come up with lyrics, what he draws upon, how his relationship with the audience works."

Being a widely regarded theatre and film impresario has turned out to be just one of Farsi's London callings. In the mid-'90s, he formed a hospitality company that would go on to include London restaurants such as St. James's cocktail bar and cigar room Che, members' club Soho House and Italian restaurant Cecconi's (much to Farsi's amusement today, he was twice turned away from the ultra-hip Mayfair joint for being inappropriately dressed).

Many observers may consider his new hospitality endeavours to be something of a creative tangent, but Farsi says otherwise. "Hospitality is, in itself, very much like theatre," he says. "Restaurants and hotels have a huge theatrical element, right down to there being a curtain call. It's a form of entertainment. And there's a lot of personality similarities between chefs and directors — 'It's my way or no way' and so on. There's the same passion — chefs have to have it, as handling knives and hot metal in some city basement is never going to be fun."

Next up for this arm of his enterprise are two hotel projects, one in Rome and another in Paris. "We're negotiating for



premises at the moment and drawing up plans," he says, before explaining how neatly the French capital exemplifies what he sees as a void in the hotel market. "Paris, to me, has two styles of hotel," he says. "You have the 'grande dames' — opulent, beautiful places with repro furniture; very old-school and, in some cases, intimidating. Then you have the funky, hipster places that are, in some cases, beautiful — but totally non-functional. They don't want you spending time in the room; they want you downstairs spending money."

This is not, for Farsi, what luxury accommodation should be all about as we approach the middle of the 2010s. So, where does he prefer to place the focus? "It should be about beautiful pieces of furniture that are functional but are not reproductions of something else; really personalised service, not indifference or rudeness. It should be about the fact that small things go a long way — just understanding how people want to eat, how quickly they want to eat; understanding closet space, bathroom light, noise. It's about understanding that people don't want to hit 10 different light switches before they can go to sleep; they don't

want to hear showers running in other rooms. It's about visitors knowing from the moment they step inside that staff will be there for them without them having to say anything. The other thing is constant reinvention: you have to travel, observe, see and bring in new things without changing the DNA of the hotel."

Real estate, property development, IT, energy and mineral resources are other areas found in Corniche Group's portfolio of disparate endeavours, and to attempt to encapsulate Hani Farsi's multiple *raison d'être* with anything like comprehensiveness

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here would be futile. But ask him which of his undertakings he is most emotionally bonded to, and he will tell you, without doubt, that it is his company's philanthropic arm, the Mohamed S. Farsi Foundation (MSFF). Founded in 2009, its CEO is the senior-year Jewish roommate who was Farsi's first-ever school friend ("He also ended up being the best man at my wedding," he laughs). The foundation was only ever going to be named after one man. "I noticed that a lot of people honour their loved ones after they've passed away, so I wanted to make sure that my father was honoured during his lifetime," he says. "So rather than name it after myself, I named it after him — after all, it was him who taught me very early on in life how important it is not to be disconnected from those around you, and to make sure that you constantly give back."

Farsi's very inclination towards charitable projects, as well as how to approach them tactically and philosophically, was learned by osmosis during his formative years. "I grew up seeing my father not just being involved with business, but also establishing scholarships, paying for people's medical care, restoring important buildings, buying art and donating it to the city. And, in essence, these three things form the basis of what the Mohamed S. Farsi Foundation gives money to today — culture, health and education. The main principle of the MSFF is that the recipients are not dictated by sex, religion, ethnicity or background; it's down to whomever we feel is the most deserving."

Scholarships, feeding programmes, sustainability initiatives, humanitarian efforts and cultural projects are conducted and/or aided by the foundation all over the planet. Last year, for example, saw investment in the preservation and study of archaeological sites in Cambodia, as well as in Project HOPE, which aids survivors of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami that devastated rural parts of northern Japan — to name just two initiatives. The foundation has also established the self-explanatory Mohammed Said Farsi Chair of Islamic Peace at Farsi's alma mater, the American University.

How does he select causes to back? Partly by devouring a lot of current affairs — "absorbing what needs doing," as he puts it — and by regular consultation with a board of trustees. "We belong to a number of organisations with whom we discuss initiatives, trends that are going on — it's all very organic, which is what I want with all my work," he says. "The desire is there to give, and it's not affected by the company's performance or profit."

Other times, worthy initiatives seem to fall at Farsi's feet almost by accident. "I went to the World Cup in South Africa," says Farsi, who is a serious football fan — a staunch supporter of Arsenal, in fact — but a man who knows how to mix very serious business with pleasure. "I wanted to reach out to all the NGOs there and talk to them," he says. "I also went to the townships to see what their needs were. During one visit, I met this incredible woman — Rosie — in a township outside Cape Town. She has a tiny little shack, and for the last 21 or 22 years, she has been cooking food, selling it to adults but giving it for free to children. Her thinking is that they won't learn anything at school if they have an empty stomach. She'd been through adversity herself, but was so full of energy and love. So we now finance her on a programme every year. It's often on those lines: you travel, you meet people, you like their story, and you realise that this is why you got to meet them. The notion that you're changing their lives is not accurate — they're changing yours as well. Someone like that teaches someone like me about humility, about giving back, about a philosophy of life that I find extremely valuable — and strictly honest."

If the life and work of Hani Farsi seem astonishing to the reader, the blend of insouciance, sincerity, charm, modesty, acumen and discretion with which he accounts for it all is even more jaw-dropping. He can talk about the broad-stroke flaws in a George Lucas script one minute, water shortage in Tanzania the next, switching effortlessly from the requisite mischief required of the former subject to the solemn poise demanded of the latter. He laughs a great deal and can be infectiously emotive, but is never flippant or sanctimonious. He comes across as a man who not only has an expansive emotional spectrum, but has also worked out exactly how to employ it to his own ends — to the maximum benefit of humanity.

Where he finds the time for all his endeavours, passions and interests — requiring as they do consumption of reality at its most starkly mendacious as well as its most divine, innovative and edifying — is anyone's guess. What is a pretty safe bet, however, is that Dr. Mohammed Said Farsi — scholar, aesthete, impeccable father figure and former Mayor of Jeddah — has good reasons to be truly proud of his son.

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CEO of Corniche Group, Hani Farsi — a veritable Renaissance man with diverse interests in everything from philanthropy to architecture, film and fine art.