

A Short Introduction to Iranian Drama

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The blurred past of Iranian theater

In this essay, a historical survey of dramatic forms in Iran will be presented. However, it is exactly with these terms, i.e. “History” and “dramatic forms”, that disagreements and controversies begin. Therefore, it is important at the first stage to consider and try to elucidate the problems related to this concept.

First, except for cultural universals which are common worldwide, several reasons make it difficult to identify the main origins of some early forms of Iranian dramatic performances. For instance, the geographic position of Iran led to the historical contact with ancient Rome, Greece and Byzantium; and the acceptance of Islam opened the gates of Iran to the Arab world. So, it is obvious that there are many cultural similarities between Iranians and other nations and cultures. Also, On the other hand, Iran is a multi-ethnic society composed of Persians, Azeri Turks, Kurds, Lurs, Turkmens, Iranian Arabs, Baloch and others (mainly Talysh, Armenians, Georgians, Circassians, Assyrians, Mandeans, and Tats). Each ethnic group has certainly influenced Iranian traditional performances with their rich cultural heritage and special rites.

The second problem is the lack of valid evidence concerning ancient Iranian dramatic performances, as in a society where only a few number of people were literate there were not so many written documents to be passed on to later generations.

Furthermore, the social adversities in different historical periods such as prolonged wars and conquests led to the destruction of those historical documents that existed. Also, history shows that Iranian rulers, after rising to power, rejected the previous social achievements instead of implementing reforms. Naturally, as a consequence, there was no long-term viability for art forms in the Iranian society that had been deprived of long-term social stability.

Additionally, forced conversion to Islam and religious prohibitions¹ caused devasta-

¹ Before the Islamic conquest around 7th century, the Persians had been mainly Zoroastrian. However, there were also large Christian and Jewish communities. Eastern Iran was predominantly Buddhist.

tion to most of the achievements of ancient Persian civilizations by the new Islamic polity.

The last point is that the first Iranian dramatic performances are actually labeled as informal because although scattered documents and historical books indicate that there were some dramatic forms in Iran, most of them remain as mere rituals and local traditions among the lower-classes.

Only through social changes some of these informal traditional performances, that contained dramatic features, turned into the accepted dramatic forms. Actually, turning to jokes and satire as a kind of comic theater with dance, mime, slapstick and lampoon accompanied by music, was the secret solution for their survival in society. However, the upper classes and high culture, rejected those quasi-comical forms of theater because they could not express the reality of their lives. Also, the old dramatic performances were labeled as informal, because they were performed on the streets and in the houses of the nobles as a public entertainment, i.e. not in a formal theater with professional theater-goers as audience.

It is not until the early days of 20th century that, in the course of the Persian constitutional revolution followed by very fundamental social changes, new attitudes toward dramatic forms and theater in Iran emerged. Before that there was no awareness of the possibility to use theater as an independent art form with specific cultural and artistic functions. This awareness led to the classification of Iranian theater as an independent art form and the recognition of *Ta'ziyeh* [passion play], *Naghali* [narration], *Kheymeh shab bazi* [puppet show], *Ruhowzi* [burlesque], *Shahnameh*² *Khani* [*Shahnameh*] and *Namayeshe ghahve khanei* [café play] as official national Iranian theatrical forms.

Categories of Iranian drama

There are eight national-traditional dramatic forms in Iran. We call them national-traditional versions because as it mentioned, some of them remained as mere local rituals and other types turned into dramatic forms and then expanded in other parts of Iran as the Iranian. However, generally speaking, all of them are representative of history, culture and ideology of the society of Iran. The eight forms are:

- 1– Ritual performances
- 2– Processional performances, quasi theatrical processions

There was a slow but steady movement of the population toward Islam. By the late eleventh century, the majority of Persians had become Muslim, at least nominally.

²The *Book of kings* in English translation. This book is a long epic poem written by Ferdowsi between 977 and 1010 CE. It is mainly about the mythical and historical past of the Persian empire from the creation of the world until the Islamic conquest of Persia.

- 3– Dramatic storytelling, dramatic-musical storytelling, and narrative dances
- 4– Street performances, outdoor performances
- 5– Puppetry, shadow play and Punch and Judy shows
- 6– Traditional farcical plays
- 7– *Ta'ziyeh* (passion play)
- 8– Western theater (contemporary theater).³

The first three items are traditional performances that either been forgotten completely or are hardly performed. Traditional farcical play is a bridge between traditional forms and theatrical performances. *Ta'ziyeh* is the product of the Islamic era and Western theater emerged during the recent centuries as a direct result of the first contacts with Western countries.

Ritual performances

The foundation of early dramatic forms in Iran can be traced back in ancient era. The development of the theater and the wonders of acting found in the ceremonial performances, glorifying national and legendary heroes and humiliating their enemies, involved dances and musical narrations based on legends, myths, epic and lyric stories. In pre-Islamic Iran, as in other ancient civilizations, gods and myths, traditions and rituals constituted the basis of early dramas. As Anasory explains, «[r]esearchers have found some clues about early forms of narrative drama in ancient Iran by studying and examining the Parthian (247 BCE – 224 CE) treatises, legends, myths, historical books, archaeological remains and religious rites».⁴ Clerics, attendants and converts desired to visualize their ideologies and religious beliefs by representing myths, legends, symbols and religious principles. Ritual performances can be divided into two groups: masked dances and supplicatory rituals. Masked dances were performed in ancient times. Worshipping of gods, totems, and for entertainment. The participants by constantly repeating on imitative actions and transcendental experiences tried to ignore their own physical limitations and obtain supernatural powers: «In the ritual ceremony, the performers wore zoomorphic masks, danced and sang. They believed that people could ignore their own nature and achieve supernatural power by dancing and wearing masks».⁵ Janati Atai reports some ancient records:

³ Farhad Nazerzadeh Kermani, *Darāmedi bar namāyešnāme šenasi* [an Introduction to Drama], Samt Publishing, Tehran 2004, p. 43.

⁴ Jaber Anasori, *Naqqāli - te'ātr-e dāstāni* [Narration-Fictional Theater: Introduction on Performance and Invocation], Jahad Daneshgaahi, Tehran 1987, p. 40.

⁵ Luke Beneva, *Jahān-e ostur-e šenāsi* [World of Mythology], translated by Jalal Satari, Markaz Publication, Tehran 1995, p. 23.

Archeologists have discovered some potteries traced to early second millennium BCE around cities of Shush and Kerman. There are images on these potteries which demonstrate the usage of some masks like raven, lion, goat, buffalo, hawk, mythical half human creatures and quasi-dance movements. Each of these animals is a symbol of Mithraism⁶ and were applied in specific ceremonies. These rituals were performed in places similar to cellars, where decorated by the statue of the god Mithras. Clergy and attendees tried to represent the unity of father (sky) and mother (earth) which was considered as the soul of life.⁷

Supplicatory rituals have usually been performed to request healing, change the ill-fated situation, drive out the evil spirits and other invisible forces from the body of a patient, etc. As Jaber Anasori refers,

Women dancing in praise of *Anahita*,⁸ shamanism rituals in the south of Iran, *Goaat* in the city of Balochestan and *Parkhanha* in cities near Turkmen Sahara, were common forms of ritual performances which were performed with music, songs and rhythmical movements. Supplicatory rituals were one of the oldest traditions among nomadic tribes, shepherds, and even farmers of the cities of Lurestan, Khuzestan, Khorasan and Balochistan.⁹

Processional performances

Processional performance has two subtypes: mourning and lamenting, marrying and festivities. As Bahram Beizai mentions

Soge Shervin [mourning for Shervin], *soge Zarir* [mourning for Zarir], *soge Siavash*¹⁰[mourning for Siavash], mourning in *Muharram*¹¹ and the ceremony of *Ghali shoyan* [rug washing] in the city of Mashhad-e Ardehal are lamentation processional performances. In these ceremonies, some scenes of the heroes' martyrdom are performed symbolically and the mourning crowd followed the performance procession.¹²

⁶ The worship of Mithra, the Iranian god of the sun, justice, contract, and war in pre-Zoroastrian Iran. Known as Mithras in the Roman Empire during the 2nd and 3rd centuries BCE.

⁷ Abolghasem Janati Atai, *Bonyād-e namāyesh dar irān* [Foundation of Drama in Iran], Soroosh, Tehran 1954, p. 97.

⁸ The ancient Persian water goddess, fertility goddess and patroness of women, as well as a goddess of war. Her name means the immaculate one.

⁹ Jaber Anasori, *Op. cit.*, p. 67.

¹⁰ A major figure in Ferdowsi's epic, the *Shahnameh*. He was a legendary Iranian prince who is forced to prove his innocence by riding through a colossal mountain of fire.

¹¹ The first month of the Islamic calendar. This word means *forbidden* or *sinful*. It is a ritual mourning month for Imam Hussain and his family.

¹² Bahram Beizai, *Namāyesh dar irān* [Study on Iranian Theater], Roshangaran and Women Studies Publishing, Tehran 2004, pp. 56-57.

These acts of mourning were dedicated to spiritual-mythical heroes descended from kings and whom had been unfairly martyred. Their only fault was their persistence in justice and righteousness. Mourning for a martyr of justice can be traced back to three thousand years ago. Nowadays, only the mourning of Imam Hussain, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, is still being performed.

Mir-e-Nowrouzi (messenger of the new day), *Kuse bar nashin*, and *Mogh*¹³ *koshi* (Magiphonia or killing a Magus) are good exemplar of joyful processional performances, marrying and festivities, in ancient Iran.

Kuse bar nashin was probably common from the Achaemenid era (550-330 BCE) but after the advent of Islam its name changed into *Mir-e-Nowrouzi*. This tradition as a herald of spring was performed in the final days of winter. A man wore shabby clothes, kept a fan in his hand, rode a donkey, fanned himself and said: «It is hot». People ridiculed him by imitating his accents and behavior, laughed and threw snowballs or water at him, and in return, *Kuse* had red clay and threw it at people who did not give him any present or alms.

Kuse bar nashin celebration was held in cities of Iran and Iraq. Some sociologists believe that annual social rules were enacted and endorsed during this festivity and it was an opportunity for more interaction between kings and peasants.

Also, *Mogh koshi* was performed in commemoration of the killing of Gaumāta Magus, the impostor (Spurious Bardiya). In attempting to find its historical source, researchers hypothesized that, in 522 BCE, Gaumāta Magus, who usurped the Iranian throne, was killed by Darius of the Achaemenid. That occurrence then led to the general massacre of the Magi. So, during this festive celebration, Magi were not allowed to appear in a public place, for one day.¹⁴

Dramatic storytelling, dramatic-musical storytelling, and narrative dances

In Iran, before the rise of Islam, Gusans¹⁵ or minstrels (bards) from the middle class of society were responsible for promoting art. They were narrators of the oral lore of ancient ages through several forms of art such as music, poetry, singing, storytelling, acting, dancing, juggling, magic and acrobatics, and even tightrope walking. Gusan had an important place in Iranian social life from the Median period to the late Sasanian dynasty (224-651 CE). After that, Gusans' role became limited because of the opposition and hostility from the priests of the Zoroastrians and Christians in the west of the Sassanid empire. They believed that Gusans were infidels and their art was rooted in polytheism. Because of these pressures, Gusans'

¹³ A term to denote priests of Zoroastrianism or Zoroaster.

¹⁴ Bahram Beizai, *Op.cit.*, p. 58.

¹⁵ A creative and performing artist-singer, instrumentalist, dancer, storyteller, and professional folk actor in public theaters of Parthia and ancient Iran and medieval Armenia.

art was widely blamed and they lost their role as exponents of the oral tradition. However, in the Achaemenid period minstrels were respected. They had to be skilled in verbal art of poetry, music, singing, fairy tales storytelling, epic storytelling, narrating history, acting, joking and even divination, but their main work was singing and playing music. After Alexander's invasion (330 BCE) and the fall of the Achaemenid empire, the number of official minstrels, who worked in the king's court, declined. However, itinerant minstrels kept working and did their duty in the transmission of oral traditions.¹⁶ Also, Jaber Anasory explains the subjects of Gusans' poems:

Their epic poems were inspired by heroes and athletes who were Zoroastrian. Lyrical poems were about the love stories of the imperial family. Also, religious stories and narrations were inspired by the religious stories of Zoroastrian scripture like the *Avesta*¹⁷ and magis' statements.¹⁸

Another kind of dramatic storytelling is picture-recitation¹⁹ and narration. Narrators tell and act the stories of national heroes, while showing special pictures to the public.

This dramatic type continued after the Arabs' invasion but its focus shifted to religious issues, and actually picture-recitation changed into an Iranian religious drama. In Islamic times, a person narrated the hardships of religious leaders, particularly the Shiite leaders, in a musical tone and illustrated pictures on canvas. The main subject of these pictures were the Karbala events followed by subsidiary moral stories which were gradually added to this form.²⁰

Some researchers, by mistake, have used a different definition for religious picture-recitation. They have interpreted the canvas (*Pardeh*) as the screen (curtain) behind which jugglers and puppeteers used to hide their techniques. In fact, this is not related to *Pardeh-dari* which is another name for religious picture-recitation. Picture-recitation is an outcome of narration, public painting (*Naghali*) and a combination of music and singing that existed before the Islamic era. It is noted that screen pictures are public images which have been illustrated according to the

¹⁶ Mehrdad Bahar, *Jostār-i dar farhang-e irān* [Investigation on Iranian Culture], Fekre rooz, Tehran 1995, p. 68.

¹⁷ *Avesta*, also called *Zend-Avesta*, sacred book of Zoroastrianism containing its cosmogony, law, and liturgy, the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster (Zarathustra).

¹⁸ Jaber Anasori, *Op. cit.*, p. 72.

¹⁹ See, for example, Peter Chelkowski, *Narrative Painting and Painting Recitation in Qajar Era*, «Muqarnas», vol. 6 (1989), pp. 98-111, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1602284>> (accessed 22/07/2014).

²⁰ Soheyla Najm, *Honar-e naqqāli dar irān* [The Art of Narration in Iran], Institute Authoring, Translation and Publication of Works of Art, Tehran 2011, p. 17.

painter's imagination, historical or mythical quotes and written scripts. This kind of painting is known as *Naghashi Ghahveh khanei* (café painting) which is a kind of public painting. This form reached its zenith in cafes during the 1920s.²¹

Also, *Naghali* (narration) is one of the inseparable principles of Iranian traditional drama, which is based on the tradition of storytelling and communication with the audience. Narrators tell a story or an event in prose or verse, with appropriate rhythm based on the Iranian music system, play the roles of all the characters in the main story, and evoke the emotions of the audience by appropriate expressions and gestures.

Soheyla Najm believes that the narration in Iranian dramatic art, according to its theme and performance methods, can be divided into three types: the narration of *Shahnameh*, narration of stories and historical myths, and narration of religious events.²²

In fact, before the advent of Islam, dramatic musical storytelling in Iran was a combination of dance and music. Dancing, as an important part of Iranian rituals was a dramatic form for narrating various stories in different parts of Iran.²³ Bahram Beizai notes that «among the remaining limited resources, the first evidence is a picture of a woman dancer and a musical instrument on a vase from the Sassanid period (224-651 CE)».²⁴

Street performances, outdoor performances

The Snake charming, tricks and magic, and the like are subtypes of Iranian street performances. This quasi-theatrical entertainment was called *Ma'rekeh* (show). This term includes some forms of drama which itinerant entertainers performed

²¹ Rubin Pakbaz, *Dā'era-t-ol-ma'āref-e honar* [Encyclopedia of Art], Farhange Moaser, Tehran 1999, pp. 586-588.

²² Soheyla Najm, *Op. cit.*, p. 37.

²³ Many Islamic rulings relating to the performing arts are gender based. There is no clear position in Islam regarding music. Certain schools of Sunnis as well as some Shiites hold that music is forbidden with the sole exception being that women can play the Daf, a traditional one-sided drum, at celebrations and festivals. However, some Islamic groups and denominations deem music permissible including many Sufi orders who use music as part of their worship. Islam does allow singing without musical accompaniment within prescribed circumstance namely that the performer be of the same gender as the audience. Others hold that music is permitted in Islam provided that the lyrics are not obscene or vulgar. Gender-based rulings are also evident in Islam's position on dance. Dance is permissible for women within a female only environment and is often performed at celebrations. Dancing is prohibited for men. Again, some Sufi orders are the exception to this rule. They include the whirling dervishes who use dance as a means of worship. Whilst theater is permitted by Islam, Islam does not allow for any performances to depict Allah, the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, the angels or matters detailed in the religion that is unseen. See for example, Peter Chelkowski, *Islam in modern drama and theater*, «Brill», 23, n. 24 (1984), <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1570662>> (accessed 22/07/2014).

²⁴ Bahram Beizai, *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

publicly. A showman had to be a wonderful storyteller, acrobat, magician and musician. Gypsies²⁵ had important roles in the rise of this drama form in Iran, especially during the pre-Islamic era. Their life style and their dramatic techniques all over the world were summarized in dancing, acting, singing, bull fighting, roping, fortune telling, magic and charms casting spells. They were scattered in many places of Asia and Europe but significant numbers of them were inhabitants of Iran and Eastern Europe. The gypsies were survivors of emigrants who came to the Iranian Plateau²⁶ during 420-438 CE.²⁷

The traditions of these itinerant people were one of the most important sources of Iranian dramatic forms. Gypsies, through ongoing migrations and special life conditions, encountered cultures of different Iranian ethnic groups. For a long time, they transferred among those groups some forms of drama as well as some of their artistic features and techniques. Jahangir Nasri classified the effects of gypsies on Iranian drama as follows: «saving some forms of drama from oblivion, preserving some ancient local plays, maintaining and transferring many melodies and dances, aesthetic impacts and adding ethnic features on dances and musical melodies».²⁸

Puppetry

Puppetry is considered one of the oldest types of drama in the world, particularly in the East. In Iran, glove and string puppets were more popular than shadow puppetry.

In Iran, it is an old form of drama. Historians trace it back in 224 to 651 CE and arrival of Indians in Iran. There are many references in historical books about this type of drama in Iran, especially after the fourth century and advent of Islam. These performances flourished from 1501 to 1736 and different types of puppetry shows became prevalent in various parts of Iran. Some examples of puppetry shows are *Sayeh bazi* [shadow puppetry], *kheyneh shab bazi* [Punch and Judy show], *Shah Salim* [King Salim], *Haji Mobarak* [Mr Mobarak], *Pahlevan kachal* [The Bald Paladin], *jiji vi ji* [non-words],

²⁵ I used this English term for groups with a traditionally itinerant lifestyle. Gypsies who immigrated to Iran included Romani people, Banjara, Dom people (from South Asian), Sri Lankan Gypsy people, Domba (from India), Lyuli (from Central Asia), Lom (from Turkey and Armenia).

²⁶ It is a geological formation in Western Asia and Central Asia. It is the part of the Eurasian Plate wedged between the Arabian and Indian plates, situated between the Zagros Mountains to the west, the Caspian Sea to the north, the Hormuz Strait and the Persian Gulf to the south and the Indus River to the east in Pakistan.

²⁷ Jacob Eduard Polak, *Safarnāme-ye pulāk "irān va irāniān"* [Itinerary of Polak "Iran and Iranian"], translated by Kave Jahandari, Kharazmi, Tehran 1989, pp. 172-175.

²⁸ Jahangir Nasri Ashrafi, *Namāyesh musiqi dar irān* [Performance and Music in Iran], Arvan Publishing, Tehran 2004, p. 48.

Hassan Kachal [Bald Hassan], *Pahlavan Panbeh* [Brave Guy], *Siahe Rastgo* [Honest Black].²⁹

Puppetry performances reached their climax in the Qajar era from 1785 to 1925. A person named Kaka Muhammad brought some puppets from China and developed this drama form. Music bands were considered as a main part of the puppetry shows in Iran which usually consisted of a *Tombak* and *Kamancheh*.³⁰

In the Pahlavi era (1925-1979), this traditional dramatic art was neglected because of the advent of new and modern forms of visual media which quickly became prevalent and pervasive.

Kheymeh shab bazi, also known as *Pardeh bazi* (Curtain play) or *lo'bat bazi* (Marionette play), is an Iranian traditional puppet theater which has continued to the present. *Kheymeh* means tent; *Shab* is night, the time when a show is normally performed and *Bazi* means to play. Therefore, a literal translation is the evening performance in a puppet booth: «A string puppet tradition, the form has been called by this name since the seventeenth century. But it relates to older puppetry that may have developed under international influences with possible Indian and Mongolian impacts». ³¹ They probably brought some costumes of public performances as shadow puppet shows to Iran.

Kheymeh shab bazi, has been a part of Persian culture for a long time, being performed from 1501 BCE to the present. The earliest references tell us briefly about the actual content but they show the philosophical importance of puppetry in Iran. The methods of performance, the characters, and the techniques made it unique in comparison to the other types of puppetry which have persisted for ages.

About the modern *Kheymeh shab bazi*, Qaribpour mentions that «the traditional *Kheymeh shab bazi* was performed in a public place and for audiences that were primarily, if not exclusively, lower-class men. But when academic puppetry and cultural revival approach merged since 1970, *Kheymeh shab bazi* is often performed in theater halls for mixed-gender audiences including academics and intellectuals». ³²

Traditional farcical plays

These quasi-entertaining theatrical activities were commonly performed in ancient

²⁹ Bahram Beizai, *Op. cit.*, pp. 84-90.

³⁰ Tombak is the principal percussion instrument of Persian music, Kamancheh is from Byzantine lyra and European violin family.

³¹ William Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran*, Image Publishers, Washington DC 2005, p. 70.

³² Behzad Gharibpour, *Vorud be donyā-ye 'arusak va namāyesh-e 'arusaki* [Entering the World of Marionettes and Puppet Plays], Intellectual Promotion Center for Children and Adolescents, Tehran 1990, p.22.

Iran in the forms of dance, mime and music which were performed by buffoons, clowns and gypsies during the ceremonies and in public places such as bazaar and public squares. They sometimes accompanied the king on the trips and during wars to entertain the soldiers and the commanders. Actually, the continuation of these performances has led to the creation of comedy drama. Because of their sense of humor, lack of religious affiliation and traditional commitment, Iranian gypsies could safely express political and social discontent and also to break the taboos. They performed narrative dances as well as humorous plays in many celebrations and they never reprimanded for their work.

Furthermore, these performances led to the development of one of the main Iranian traditional improvisatory theater, *Ru Howzi* or *Takhte Howzi*³³ (burlesque) in the Islamic period. This social satire theater was performed in the yard of a house on a *Howz* (small pool) which was covered by wood boards. This form had some typical and central character types who are famous with names such as *Kachalak*, *Baghal* (grocer), *Siah* (Black/ the clown). Among them, *Siah-Bazi* was more well-known because of the popularity of the character of *Siah*, who is the weakest character but the winner in the theatrical context. The actors had to adopt the female roles in performance because it was culturally intolerable to have women on the real stage. Periodically, however, the women came on the stage and this socio-political theater elaborated.³⁴

Actually, *Ru Howzi* is a representative of Iranian culture and the characters are shaped according to the structure of society, but an exaggerated ironical exemplar of social and political Iranian life.

We could analogize improvisational comic *Ru Howzi* or *Takhte Howzi* to the *commedia dell'arte* because of the existence of typical and central characters, the using of a simple plot line, there is no written script, and applying music and dance in performance.

Passion play, Ta'ziyeh

This Islamic religious epic drama known as the passion play is often associated exclusively with Western, and specifically, Christian theatrical tradition. *Ta'ziyeh* drama is a theatrical modality specific to the religious orientation of the Iranian people. These are passion plays dealing with the martyrdom of Hussain.

³³ *Siah-Bazi* and *Ru Howzi* both have a blackface clown character, involve lewd jokes, but *Ru Howzi* is a satire social theater that mocks domestic life and was often performed at private Iranian residences on a stage over a pool of water that is often found in home courtyards. *Siah-Bazi* is performed in more public places like theaters or coffee houses because their main aim was to criticize political subject matter.

³⁴ Farhad Nazerzadeh Kermani, *Op. cit.*, pp.47-48.

In the definition of *Ta'ziyeh*, Chelkowski noted that one of the most highly developed and powerful examples of Iranian drama is *Ta'ziyeh*: the passion play of the Shiite Muslims performed in Iran which recounts the tragedy of Hussain. It is the only serious drama ever developed in the Islamic world, except for contemporary theater. The *Ta'ziyeh* was born in the middle of the eighteenth century (although many scholars believe it occurred as early as the end of the seventeenth century). Like Western passion plays, *Ta'ziyeh* dramas were originally performed outdoors at crossroads and other public places where large audiences could gather; then, performances took place in the courtyards of inns and private houses, but eventually a unique structure called *Takiyeh* or *Hussainiyeh* was constructed by individual towns for the staging of the plays.³⁵

Ehsan Yarshater discussed about the three ancient rituals which are the origin of *Ta'ziyeh*:

There are many valid pieces of evidence which confirm *Ta'ziyeh* came from the changing of three ancient rituals. First of all, the description of Muharram rituals has been driven from the ancient annual mourning processions in honor of Tammuz, a god of agriculture and flocks who personifies the creative powers of spring. Second, it most probably goes back to Eastern Iran in pre-Islamic times, where we should look for the basis of a tradition which provided a ready mold for the development of the *Ta'ziyeh*. That mold is the life and death story of the beloved and gallant prince Siavash. He had a foreboding of his fate, passion and cruel death like Hussain. Further parallels to *Ta'ziyeh* could be found in the Middle Persian epic called *Yadegare Zarir* which had been performed for centuries by bards and minstrels to describe another young martyrdom.³⁶

The massacre of Hussain and his followers took place on the tenth of Muharram. But in *Ta'ziyeh*, the battle is divided into many different episodes and performed on separate days. The only fixed day and play in the Muharram repertory is the martyrdom of Hussain on the tenth day (*Ashura*), while other episodes can be performed in varying sequences. This is followed by a daily progression of plays, each devoted to the martyrdom of various members of Hussain's family or his companions. The dramatization of the death of Hussain gives the performers and audiences an opportunity to show their own sorrows and desires as an expression of their faith within an archetypal setting. In the other interpretation, the emotional reaction of audiences is quite similar to the acquisition of compassion and Catharsis after watching the tragedies.

Fabulously elegant stage attire was common at the Royal Theater during the reign of Nasser al-Din Shah (1848-1896). There was no attempt to make the actors'

³⁵ Peter Chelkowski, *Time Out of Memory: Ta'ziyeh*, «TDR», 49, n. 4, (winter 2005), p. 17.

³⁶ Ehsan Yarshater, *Development of Persian Drama in the context of cultural confrontation in Iran, continuity and variety*, New York University Press, New York 1971, p. 88.

garments historically accurate. Costumes are also meant to be representational. The main goal of costume design was to help the spectators identify a character and his nature by his clothing. There is a clear-cut division between the protagonists and antagonists in the *Ta'ziyeh*. The protagonists sing their parts while the antagonists recite their own. Further accentuation of this division is given by the color of their costumes. Color symbolism further helps the audience to recognize different dramatic characters and situations. When a white cloth is put on a protagonist's shoulders or he dons a white shirt, it is understood that white symbolizes a shroud and he will soon sacrifice his life and be killed. In general, the acting technique, mimicry and gestures of the opponents are more pronounced than those of the protagonists. Men play female roles, and young boys play the roles of girls. In the past, and especially from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, actors of *Ta'ziyeh* were chosen according to their physical suitability for specific roles. Decor and props in *Ta'ziyeh* are totally symbolic. There is a marked difference between the starkness of the stage decor and the richness of the theater decoration. Symbolic props serve as decor: a basin of water, for example, represents the Euphrates³⁷ River; a branch of a tree stands for a palm grove. The empty stage represents the desolate plain of Karbala. Since *Ta'ziyeh* is musical drama, vocal and instrumental performance is important. Singers are accompanied by a variety of drums, trumpets, flutes, and cymbals.³⁸

Western style theater

The arrival of Western style theater was a part of the modernization process in Iran. It was introduced to the society by the intellectuals' activities and reformers attempts, which exerted a lot of positive consequences, during the period from 1848 to 1896. Furthermore, propagation of modernism and democratic ideas, increasing the number of literates and newspapers, traveling abroad made Iranian intellectuals aware of the significant role of theater in the process of social changes.³⁹

A glance at the Pavlovich report about Iranian theater indicates that Iranians acquaintance with Western theater lasted for a century and took place in several ages. Initially, a bloody campaign in Georgia, which was done by Agha Muhammad Khan Qajar in 1796, caused a bloody theatrical link among Tehran and Tbilisi. Afterward, sending five educated Iranian students to the United Kingdom in 1815

³⁷ The longest and one of the most historically important rivers of Western Asia. One of the cities near this river in Iraq is Karbala which is the location of Hussain and his family slaughter. Hence, this river is a holy symbol among Muslims.

³⁸ Peter Brook, *Learning on the Moment: A Conversation with Peter Brook*, »Parabola«, n. 4, (May 1979), p. 52.

³⁹ Jamshid Malekpour, *Namāyesh dar irān* [Drama in Iran], Toos Publishing, Tehran 2007, p. 27.

led to the familiarity with British theater. Dispatching the first Iranian representatives to the court of Russia in 1828 caused visiting the theater in St. Petersburg. Establishing the *Dar-al-Fonun* School⁴⁰ and translation movement in around 1851 speeded up the entrance of European dramatic literature to Iran. In addition, these changes also provided the base of the Persian Constitutional Revolution.⁴¹

After these fundamental changes, the first specific group of music and drama whose name was *Okhovat* (Fraternity) was formed and most of their works were critical pantomimes against the harsh and autocratic government. In 1909, *Farhang* (culture) Company emerged and its main ambition was to establish modern schools. Actually, they started to use theater as a cultural and a money-making activity to achieve their goal. In 1911, National Theater Group was founded and they believed theater activities can cause to social and political changes; their six-year record is full of critical comedies and tragedies. The first performance of the National Theater Group was Gogol's *the government inspector*; then followed, some dramas by Beaumarchais and Molière.⁴²

Also, there were other scattered groups such as the Armenians with the Caucasus and Iran who had a significant influence on Iranian theater, as well as groups of the Ottoman Turks, and the Zoroastrians theater group that were active in 1910. In 1911 a group of social-democrat women performed several famous plays whereas many women were prohibited even from watching the performances.⁴³

Concurrent with these activities, various groups were still performing traditional forms of theater in public places and *Ta'ziyeh* became well-known as an independent theatrical form.⁴⁴

About the authors who followed the process of modernization Malekpour writes that

foreign writers, such as Aziz Haji Begof from Azerbaijan, were so influential. He was the founder of opera in Iran because he converted Persian ancient literature into the opera and musical comedies between the years 1907 and 1937. Also, from 1920, authors such as Mirza Fathali Khan Akhundzadeh, Mirza Jalil Muhammad Qulizadeh, and others continued writing social realism drama. In 1922, Mirza Habib Esfahani, Ali Muhammad

⁴⁰ The first modern university and modern institution of higher learning in Persia, established in 1851.

⁴¹ The Persian Constitutional Revolution took place between 1905 and 1907. The revolution led to the establishment of a parliament in Persia, opened the way for cataclysmic change in Persia, heralding the modern era and it saw a period of unprecedented debate in a burgeoning press.

⁴² Mark Pavlovich, *Engelāb-e mašrute dar irān* [Constitutional Revolution in Iran], translated by Mehrdad Hoshyar, Habibi, Tehran 1987, p. 58-68.

⁴³ I refer the reader to number 23. In addition, I should emphasize that some Muslim extremist clergies had stated that even watching a performance is not permissible, so this group of women were innovators and pioneers.

⁴⁴ Jamshid Malekpour, *Op. cit.*, pp. 48-50.

Khan Oveisi contributed to the creation of the Iranian classic verse dramas which was rooted in Western musical comedies.⁴⁵

The Constitutional Revolution in Iran was a milestone for many changes in different fields, specifically in literature and drama. One of the most important events during this period was the publishing of a specific theatrical journal, because intellectuals endeavored to popularize the theater as a means to reflect the social and cultural discontent.

The advent of a four-page journal which called *Tiart* (Theater), on the fifth day of May 1908, was not only an innovation, but it also demonstrated the intelligence of its inventor, Mirza Reza Naini. He introduced great Western writers such as Shakespeare and Molière and then started to write the first reviews of staged plays; although those reviews were not about theatrical performances, but rather they were an impressionistic criticism related to the plot of dramas, they helped to popularize the theater.⁴⁶ Furthermore, these social changes had some direct influence on literature and writing style as Arianpoor says

During the establishment of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905 to 1907) theater became a second priority of Iranian intellectuals after journalism. Iranian authors began to adapt two main sources. First source was the events that occurred during the Constitutional revolution, and the second one was the foreign comedies and plays by Molière, Alexander Dumas, Friedrich Schiller, Eugène Labiche and other well-known foreign writers. The result was shaping of particular style of writing through new word choices and sentence formations.⁴⁷

To sum up, although what made the base of contemporary Iranian theater have some roots in the cultural activity in ancient times, the mainstream started by innovative changes in the society after the Constitutional Revolution.

The theater of Iran from the ancient era until the present had four turning points: The Arabs invasion and the advent of Islam, the Constitutional Revolution, the Islamic Revolution and the eight-year war.⁴⁸ Actually, what has been presented in this paper is not a scrutiny of the contemporary theater after the Constitutional Revolution, the Islamic Revolution, and the Iran-Iraq war that need elaborate technical discussion in future.

Theater in Iran had, and has, progress and regress under direct influence of social

⁴⁵ Ivi, pp. 206-210.

⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 248.

⁴⁷ Yahya Arianpoor, *Az šaba tā nimā* [From Saba to Nima], Zavvar, Tehran 1979, p. 13.

⁴⁸ The Iran-Iraq War, also known as the First Persian Gulf War, was an armed conflict between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Ba'athist Republic of Iraq lasting from September 1980 to August 1988, making it the twentieth century's longest conventional war.

circumstances. It is like a ball on sea waves which has not reached a shore yet and it rises and falls irregularly and unpredictably. Today Iranian theater is living along with censorships and strong social fluctuations. Nevertheless, academics and intellectuals in fields such as theater, dramatic literature, acting, directing, etc. have achieved considerable success, and the traditional theater is being rediscovered. Playwrights are using deep past and dynamic present to create traditional-modern Iranian theater. However, the theater in Iran actually still needs more private and governmental support in order to activate its potentials and provide the satisfactory conditions required by a higher standard.