

# Theater of Iran



*By: Rahman Mehraby*

Theater was originated, through an evolution, from religious rites and ceremonies. Even when it grew to a point where it contained no rites or worshiping, it still needed religious bodies and their treasury. In monotheist religions like Islam or Zoroastrianism, it is blasphemous to imagine any likeness for god or saints. Therefore, they are less interested in plays than others.

Naturally, people's tendencies developed toward amusement and caused the early forms of theater to lose their religious shells.

## **Theater in Iran before Islam**

Some early examples of plays in Iran must have started in prehistoric era while harvesting crops, hunting animals, round-the-fire evenings, etc. It started by dances, narrations, storytelling and so on. Several principle features of this period were transferred to historic periods plays like make-up, mask wearing, act, gestures and performance agreements.

Later, some heroic and mythical characters formed the themes of theaters like Siavash, Rostam, etc.

In some cases, the groups of actors accompanied army expeditions to dance war dances both to amuse the troops and arouse their fighting spirits. There must have been theater places at least in Ecbatana and Kerman.

After Alexander's invasion to Iran, Greek theater influenced Iranians'.

Historical events like Geomatai the magi being killed by Darius the great, seasonal changes like the end of winter time and other important occasions made their ways into peoples festivals, games and celebrations that could ultimately develop ancient communities' theatrical interests toward a better established art.

During Sassanians, some thousands of gypsy actors, actresses, singers, musicians and puppeteers came to Iran from India and dispersed in various corners of the empire to present their art, which later formed one of the solid foundations of Iranian theater.

## **Theater in Iran after Islam**

After Arabs' invasion to Iran, as they did not know anything about theater, they could not present theirs to Iranians or ban it. Therefore, the religious intermediaries, clergymen, prohibited theater by their personal

interpretations of the verses of Koran or similar traditions. Apparently, it was considered interfering with God's creation to create a character in a play, but as the creative taste of acting could not be suppressed, it could find other ways to express itself within the next two or three centuries in a more closed way.

People's hatred against bully superiors and their wishes formed the themes of the plays performed by gypsies.

### ***Religious Theater (Ta'azieh)***

During Moharram (a month in lunar calendar) which was the mourning period for the martyrdom of the third Imam of Shiite Muslims, some specific ceremonies began to commemorate his martyrdom. They were later held in a more organized way. The ceremonies were rooted in the old traditions of mourning for Siavash in ancient Iran as it had consisted the same themes and forms.

The interesting points in these religious gatherings are the harmony and gentleness of group movements, their act-like states and at times their dances combined with mourning songs choir. Decoration and clothing were also gained attention by directors.

During Safavid period, Iranian theater became more popular and part of people's routine entertainment.

It was at the same time that

imitation was developed in various forms to amuse people. Plays were not written. So, governmental officials could not arrest theater people for what they had said or acted based on documents. Of course, sometimes, it was the government's policy to let people feel free to prevent explosions.

The re-emergence of Iranian Theater

The clowns penetrated people's hearts as well as those of kings. Therefore, there were special clowns for some kings in their courts. Generally, there were some independent theaters in Iran after Islam: storytelling, puppet plays, ta'azieh and joyful plays.

Epic stories, religious stories and then epic-religious stories were narrated for people by storytellers in public places like squares, coffee shops or tea houses, etc. Storytellers kept Iranian poems transferred to illiterate people as well.

Mongols and Ottomans largely influenced Iranian puppet plays, but later some old Iranian themes were played in new forms.

Ta'azieh became one of the best-organized popular plays in Iran that was Imam Hossein's commemorative ceremonies together with passion plays in which early post-Islam period's events were acted. Little by little, plays started to be written and recorded.

Joyful plays were revived as people's inner needs grew to compensate for all bitter moments of



real life. So, the society was mocked and ridiculed – criticism.

Gypsy performers started to settle instead of hawking. Some buildings were used for theaters temporarily. Later, they became permanent ones.

### ***European Influence***

European theater influenced Iranian one, but the imitation of them started to make people interested in Europe. This imitation was carried out in weak manner. Iranian theater was overwhelmed by the new themes, costumes, etc. So, two different classes of people cared for traditional and so-called intellectual theaters: the first group in poor quarters of cities and the second in the best financial state.

Women who have been banned from acting in the public had their own private circles, which stopped when theater actresses went on stage in the 20th century.

# Another Birth

by Forugh Farrokhzad



My whole being is a dark chant  
which will carry you  
perpetuating you  
to the dawn of eternal growths and  
blossoming  
in this chant I sighed you sighed  
in this chant

I grafted you to the tree to the water to  
the fire.

Life is perhaps  
a long street through which a woman  
holding a basket passes every day

Life is perhaps  
a rope with which a man hangs himself  
from a branch  
life is perhaps a child returning home  
from school.

Life is perhaps lighting up a cigarette  
in the narcotic repose between two love-  
makings  
or the absent gaze of a passerby  
who takes off his hat to another passerby  
with a meaningless smile and a good  
morning .

Life is perhaps that enclosed moment  
when my gaze destroys itself in the pupil  
of your eyes  
and it is in the feeling  
which I will put into the Moon's impression  
and the Night's perception.

In a room as big as loneliness  
my heart  
which is as big as love  
looks at the simple pretexts of its  
happiness  
at the beautiful decay of flowers in the vase  
at the sapling you planted in our garden  
and the song of canaries  
which sing to the size of a window.

Ah  
this is my lot  
this is my lot  
my lot is  
a sky which is taken away at the drop of  
a curtain  
my lot is going down a flight of disused  
stairs  
a regain something amid putrefaction  
and nostalgia

my lot is a sad promenade in the garden  
of memories  
and dying in the grief of a voice which  
tells me  
I love  
your hands.

I will plant my hands in the garden  
I will grow I know I know I know  
and swallows will lay eggs  
in the hollow of my ink-stained hands.

I shall wear  
a pair of twin cherries as ear-rings  
and I shall put dahlia petals on my finger-  
nails  
there is an alley  
where the boys who were in love with me  
still loiter with the same unkempt hair  
thin necks and bony legs  
and think of the innocent smiles of a little girl  
who was blown away by the wind one  
night.

There is an alley  
which my heart has stolen  
from the streets of my childhood.

The journey of a form along the line of time  
inseminating the line of time with the  
form  
a form conscious of an image  
coming back from a feast in a mirror

And it is in this way  
that someone dies  
and someone lives on.

No fisherman shall ever find a pearl in a  
small brook  
which empties into a pool.

I know a sad little fairy  
who lives in an ocean  
and ever so softly  
plays her heart into a magic flute  
a sad little fairy  
who dies with one kiss each night  
and is reborn with one kiss each dawn.

Translated by Karim Emami  
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