

An Iranian Passion Play: 'Taziyeh' in History and Performance

Theatre of a kind familiar to western audiences can be found in present-day Tehran – as Clive Barker's contribution to the 'Reports and Announcements' section later in this issue testifies. But Iran also has a traditional performing mode little known in the West – the *Taziyeh*, first performed in Britain at the Islamic Cultural Centre in London, and elsewhere, during April 2000. *Taziyeh* is a passion play, which like its medieval Christian antecedents remains inextricably linked with its religious purpose – the commemoration of the martyrdom of the third Imam of the Shi'ite Muslims, Ali Hussein, and his family in the desert of Kerbala. This relationship sustains a dramaturgy which diverges significantly from western forms, and seems at times almost contradictory – with actors who clearly know their parts by heart none the less required to read them from their scripts, to sustain both the immediacy and the spiritual truth of the performance. In this account of the origins, development, and present state of the *Taziyeh*, Reza Ale-Mohammed resolves such contradictions through an analysis of the play's distinctive quality, its performance, and its relationship with the audiences it reaches and the faith it expresses. Reza Ale-Mohammed recently completed his doctorate on the *Taziyeh* at the University of Warwick.

The show has not started yet. The platform, *Sakou*, is empty, no curtain separates the audience from the platform nor from the huge setting which could clearly be seen. The *Tekieyh* (performance space) has been elaborately decorated by standing or hanging black and green flags surrounding boxes and pillars. The symbols of the Hand of Abbas and the Bier awaken the feelings of the audience towards the events of Karbela.

All this decoration creates a magnificent atmosphere for the performance of a *Majlis* [play] of *Taziyeh*. The preliminaries begin. After an hour of witnessing the procession of devotees who beat their breasts, silence is established. The group of musicians begins to play a plaintive melody. The self-composed group of players for today's *Majlis* led by the *Ostad*, *Moein al Boka* [*Taziyeh* stage manager], arrives in the *Tekieyh*. They are singing a dirge, in chorus, while promenading twice round the platform, smoothly. This part stands as a prologue. After all this, actors yield their place to the *Ostad*. He stands on the platform and thanks the sponsor of the *Taziyeh* and the audience. Then he gives a summary of the play to the audience, adding his own interpretation of the story and laying curses upon the unjust tyrants. When the *Ostad* has preached, those who should play the roles arrive in the arena and stand in their positions until the *Ostad* has fulfilled his prayer and preaching. At the end of this moment the group of musicians is beckoned by the *Ostad* to play a short melody.¹

THE PERSIAN PASSION PLAY or *Taziyeh* is a dramatic form adapted from the religious ceremonies commemorating the suffering and tragic death of Imam Hussein (the third Imam of the Shi'ite Moslems), his family and friends in the desert of Karbela. *Taziyeh* as a social activity is fused with literary tradition, mythical action, legend, and religious hagiography arising from the communal needs and demands of the Iranian people. *Taziyeh* can be used as a vehicle of education and enlightenment but, since the writers have had no interest in historical research and have never been constrained to tell a 'true story', it has no value at all as historical evidence. The source of the plays lies not in fact but in faith.

As Victor Turner has pointed out, 'such public events as elections, demonstrations, and public meetings have their performative and ritualistic aspects. These "social dramas" likewise aim to achieve a change in a state of affairs through specific performance. Following this line of reasoning, we see that events like the *Taziyeh* hold a place somewhere between the sacred and the secular in

all cultures.² To this line of thinking Beeman adds: "They are "liminal" events in Turner's sense of the word. Thus, through the study of the *Taziyeh* as performance, rather than strictly as literature or history, we are in a position to turn the tables on the focal concerns of earlier studies and use analysis of the *Taziyeh* as a tool for investigation of both the sacred and secular worlds within which it is contained."³

We read in the *Cambridge Guide to World Theatre*:

Religious epic theatre, *Taziyeh* or *Shabih*, continues to be performed in areas of the Middle East with a large Shi'a population: Iran, Iraq, Southern Lebanon, and Bahrain. Nevertheless, the most elaborate, full-blown performances of *Taziyeh* continued [sic] to be performed in Iran. Performances of *Taziyeh* are given both by professional troupes of players and by villagers in amateur performances. Many small towns and villages have erected special buildings, *Hoseiniieh*, specially for the performances of mourning ceremonies during the month of *Muharram*.⁴

Chelkowski, extending the identification of the *Taziyeh* with its roots as the Iranian religious play, remarks:

The *Taziyeh* of Iran is ritual theatre and derives its form and its content from deep-rooted religious traditions. But although it is Islamic in appearance, it is strongly Persian, drawing vital inspiration from its special political and cultural heritage. Its genius is that it combines immediacy and flexibility with universality. Uniting rural folk art with urban, royal entertainment, it admits no barrier between the archetype and the human, the wealthy and the poor, the sophisticated and the simple, the spectator and the actor. Each participates with and enriches the other.⁵

Finally, Mehdi Forough points to the aesthetic limitations of the *Taziyeh* as part of a national Iranian drive which has never attained sufficient independence from ritual to form a dramatic literature.⁶

The Martyrdom of Imam Hussein

The word *Taziyeh* encompasses several shades of meaning. It is understood to embrace mourning, lamentation, and reminiscing or retaining a memory of a dear one. All these

shades of meaning are encompassed in the tragic events which led to the death of the Imam Hussein and are preserved in the rituals which memorialize his fate.

The prophet Mohammed had no direct male issue, and the leadership of the Islamic faith devolved to his son-in-law, Ali (peace be upon him), husband of the prophet's daughter, Fatimah, who bore him two sons, Hassan and Hussein (peace be upon them), whom the prophet loved dearly. Upon the death of the prophet, Ali declined to take on his political authority, the Caliphate, and the leadership passed to the person of a close and senior associate of the prophet.

Three times, Ali declined to accept the Caliphate, and the unity of Islam was split by schisms, some motivated by personal and dynastic ambitions. These were so strong that when Ali finally accepted the Caliphate, to become the first Imam and the fourth Caliph, war broke out, leading to his assassination. Hassan, who followed him, suffered a similar fate, being poisoned by his wife at the bidding of the Caliph of Baghdad. The Caliphate then became disputed between the remaining son of Ali, Hussein, and Yazid, the dissolute heir to Baghdad.

Due to a set of complex circumstances, Hussein was persuaded to travel to Kufa, where he understood the people had chosen to back him. Trapped at Kerbala by the armies of Yazid, prevented from reaching the waters of the Euphrates, Hussein and his warriors were massacred and their families taken into captivity. Later this became the origin of the inherited responsibility for preserving and honouring the memory of Kerbala.

Since little exists in contemporary records from which we can deduce firm evidence for the stages of development that the *Taziyeh* underwent in its earliest period, we have to draw on the evidence of foreign travellers' accounts of sights seen on their journeys. From the nineteenth century, when the *Taziyeh* was sufficiently formed and established as a feature of Iranian life and religious observance, there is ample evidence. And even from the early seventeenth century there are eye-witness accounts of processions carrying coffins and other memorial objects:

In front of the mourning processions, camels are seen draped in green cloth upon which women and children are riding. The heads and faces of the women and children are bruised and wounded as though by arrows and they appear to be weeping and wailing. Then a company of armed men passed shooting their guns into the air. . . . After them came coffins followed by the governor of the city . . . and other notables of the government. All entered the great mosque of Shiraz. There a mullah mounted the pulpit and recited eulogies, and all wept.⁷

In none of the accounts is there direct reference to any dramatic representations. Processions carry symbolic objects, texts are read and commented on, presenting the story, and there are references to self-mutilation among the mourners (this has continued until recent times, and been suppressed only by government decrees).

Earliest Evidence of Dramatization

Jalal Asgar's ascription of the first signs of dramatization to the early eighteenth century is based on the evidence of Cornelius Le Bruyn, who recorded a ceremony in which the image of the Imam, although still artificial, was made to move by a person inside:

Until AD 1704, all the references to Husain's image were symbolic, represented by an immovable object. But Le Bruyn saw that the image was in motion and a person was actually disguised as Husain. Thus, the dramatic element of the first actor was supplemented by the element of disguise. From this time on, the more elaborated development was inevitable and the outcome was not surprising.⁸

Most of the other presentations which Le Bruyn records are in the nature of tableaux, but it seems that the eighteenth century was a period of gestation, during which the mature dramatic form of the *Taziyeh* grew out of the procession and other ritual events.

The processions became larger and more colourful each year. There was an increasing number of costumed characters on horses or camels, and there were more and more visual scenes, depicting either the events leading up to the Karbela slaughter or the tragedy itself. Most of these presentations were in the form of living tableaux staged on moving platforms. Some writers des-

cribed the make-believe battles representing the small group with Hussein fighting gallantly, while outnumbered by the much larger army of their opponents. The development of *Ruzeh-Khani* (story-telling) can also be seen to turn into a 'one-man show' through these demonstrations. All these accounts demonstrate the progression of dramatic and theatrical qualities of the *Muharram* observances which were bound eventually to give rise to the birth to the *Taziyeh* drama.⁹

We might conjecture that some external influences were evident but hardly instrumental in helping the changes. These would include some contact with Russian theatricals and, more importantly, the early presence of the mobile *Taziyeh*, with its affinity to the European mystery plays, which have been argued to provide a model.

The word *Shabih* (imitation), which is the formalist definition, is more comprehensive than the *Taziyeh*, but both have approximately the same connotations of religious tragedy and mourning. Thus the players in *Taziyeh* are called *Shabih Khan*, as imitation is an element of their performance. Within the troupes of performers, there are individual titles for the players, such as Imam Khan, the name of one of the saint's group, and Shemr Khan, one of the villains. Imam Khan is the performer who recites the verses of Imam and represents his character, while Shemr Khan is the one who recites the verses of Shemr, Yazid's lieutenant.

The theme of *Taziyeh* is a confrontation between good and evil. Therefore *Taziyeh* as a religious play includes a collection of stories dedicated to religious acts, the pattern of which seems to exist in an almost uniform way in all religions and religious art. This pattern is observed in *Taziyeh* in the form of saints and devils and their confrontation. Saints believe in the next world, whereas devils think only of the advantages of mortal life.

The audience knows the story perfectly, or at least they have heard about it, and this situation obviates the need for any exposition or character development in the plays. There is no need for the author of the *Taziyeh* to supply any significant details about the background of the action, the setting, or the personality of the characters. The evil characters know that they are evil and often

say so, while the good characters all know in advance the outcome of their actions, and often refer to this. Thus, in the core plays of the *Taziyeh* much time can be spent on such emotional scenes as tearful leave-taking and lamentations.¹⁰

The extension of these scenes intensifies the emotion felt by the audience.

Exaggerating the truth and emphasizing the biased representation of characters gives potential motives to the writer and provides impulses for the actors of the *Taziyeh*. Nevertheless, nothing must repel the audience and all is contained within the smooth, elegant framework and style and the epic sweep which characterize *Taziyeh* performances.

Acting and Performance

The recital of the epic verses or *Rajaz-Khani* (recitation of verse) – extant from the recitation of the *Epic of the King* (*Shshnameh*) – is one of the more conventional elements used in the plays. For example, two characters from each party, one from the group of saints and one from the group of villains, on opposite sides of the stage, challenge and cast their lineage in each other's teeth in the form of declamation, while every so often making a turn round the platform.

The style of acting and of exposition owes much to the conventions of *Naghali* (story-telling) – for instance, stamping, or clapping on speech stresses. When one of the enemies seeks to incarnate his army he stands on tip-toe, throwing out his arms and roaring. When it is intended, in the bright light of the *Tekiyeh* (playhouse), to represent a dark night, it is sufficient to utilize such emblematic devices as groping one's way to signify the darkness. A character lost in a desert or suffering from the rays of the sun will shade his eyes and peer into the distance to signify that he is suffering from the heat of the sun.

The actors have more freedom and flexibility in their movements and actions than in conventional theatre. They are at liberty to change the scene of action by simply moving round to another corner of the stage, into the aisle, or even, if deemed necessary, by climbing the wall of the *Tekiyeh* and continuing the show on the roof.

In representing the characters in the plays, the players are very careful to maintain distance between themselves and the characters they represent, and to make this clear to the audience. In addition, the players in *Taziyeh* cannot hide their feelings of veneration for Imam Hussein and his family, nor can they disguise their feelings of vilification for Yazid (the enemy) and his cronies, whom they play. Nor can the *Taziyeh* player, who is also a believing Shi'ite, ever permit himself to become one with the Imam, an act which would in his opinion be blasphemy.

This also pertains to the playing of the villains. The distance between the actor and the person of the villain is clear and unavoidable, first because the inherent loathing and repulsion which the Shi'ite actor feels for Yazid and Shemr is so strong that any artistic desire to identify with the character is nullified; secondly, because the behaviour of Yazid and Shemr towards the Imam is considered inhuman – they have been converted into such monsters that it would be impossible for them to be portrayed realistically. Therefore the only thing a Shi'ite *Taziyeh* player desires, and in principle is able to do, is visibly to represent Hazrat-e Hussein and Ali (peace be upon them), and Shemr (may he be cursed), to allude to their personalities, to recall their existence – and nothing more.

This distance between the actor and the role in *Taziyeh* is so obvious that if (as has recently happened in several *Taziyeh*) a player refers directly to this separation, his action must be considered inappropriate and seen as the influence of new theatrical ideas. As Count Gobineau says:

The actor is under a charm; he is under it so strongly and completely that almost always one sees [the actors portraying] Yazid [the usurping caliph], the wretched Ibn-Sad [Yazid's general], and the infamous Shemr [Ibn-Sad's lieutenant], at the moment they vent the cruellest insults against the Imams, whom they are going to massacre, or against the women of the family of Imam, whom they are ill-using, burst into tears and repeat their part with sobs. The public is neither surprised nor displeased at this; on the contrary, it beats its breast at the sight, throws up its arms towards heaven with invocations of God, and redoubles its groans.¹¹

This is one of the most significant features of the *Taziyeh*. Since both the actors and audience are aware of the events of *Karbela*, and are united in their condemnation, there is no illusion, suspense, or dramatic tension. The actors of *Taziyeh* on both sides, of sacred and evil characters, do not believe that they are playing the role of the individuals involved within the tragedy of *Karbela*: rather, they believe they are narrators who make a massive effort towards creating and then transferring the mood and feeling of the actual events of the day of *Ashura* to their audience.

The Nature of Dramatic Narration

The actors playing villains have the ability to induce a most delicate feeling in their audience or to move them to tears by showing a harsh action or tone towards the protagonists. The actors at both extremes weep for Imam Hussein during the short course of offering the tragedy of *Karbela*. Even while the play is in progress any actor might ask a member of the audience or another actor for a cloth or handkerchief to wipe his tears.

The actor of *Taziyeh* in his break time sits among the audience and talks to them while sipping his tea or coffee. While acting, he may return the greetings of friends by waving or speaking without disrupting the integrity of the performance. As Andrejz Wirth says: 'A *Taziyeh* actor cannot "fall out of the role" because he does not identify with it. . . . The "role carrier" keeps his own identity intact and can react at any time in his capacity as a non-performer.'¹² And Peter Brook adds: 'In the *Taziyeh* there is no attempt, theatrically speaking, to do anything too well: the acting does not demand characterizations that are too complete, detailed or realistic.'¹³

It is traditional to place the Imam and his family on the platform and his enemies outside, all round the platform. To signify that they are under siege, the family of the Imam never leave the platform while they are waiting to play their roles – but when one of them does leave, this indicates that he is going to take part in the war.

The martyrdom of the Imam Hussein is traditionally staged so that he is surrounded

by a large number of enemies. As they attack him they mask his body from view. During this, Shemr cries out loudly to the audience asking them to lament the martyrs of *Karbela*. From the mass of enemies a pigeon is then released and flies away, representing either the soul of the Imam or a messenger presaging his death. The surrounding of the Imam is the signal for the flight of his family, and their capture by Ibn Sad occurs simultaneously with his death. Whilst capturing the family, the actors portraying Ibn Sad and his army weep while pulling the fugitives to the floor. In the end, the director arrives and signals to the actors the end of the action. Then he prays for all those present and all activists, and announces the name of the *Taziyeh* to be performed on the next day.

No time is wasted on scene-shifting, and changes are effected by simple description or are left to the imagination of the audience. The passing of time, the distance between two locations, and a long journey are shown conventionally, by taking a turn round the platform once or twice. And when an actor departs from a point of origin towards a new destination, he will announce the name of the new location on his arrival.

Past, present, and future coexist simultaneously in the *Taziyeh* performance. There is also no specific locality, but all localities are presented simultaneously on its arena stage.¹⁴

Each actor holds his script in his hand despite knowing it well. There is no embarrassment in reading from the text, and the conventions of performance are such that nothing is disturbed if an actor forgets his lines. The *Ostad* (stage manager) also has the script with him – in his shawl, out of the way of the action, so that if one of the actors loses his script he will be able to offer a copy to him. Sometimes he holds the script to prompt the actors.

The *Ostad* is present and active during the course of the performance. He might beckon the actors to stop the show for a short while, then address the spectators, recalling the most stirring events of the story, intent on keeping the attention of the audience. Thereafter he demands their sympathy for what is



Two kinds of *Taziye* staging. Left: in the open air. Below: in the more confined space of the Islamic Cultural Centre in London.



passing before them, seeking their compassion and tears for the martyrs. At the end of an intervention he signals the restart of the show.

When one of the actors is going into his last combat the director will dress him in his winding sheet or, giving him a sword, hold the stirrup for him to mount his horse, and insert a supply of chopped straw (to signify and mark the character's death) into the

hands of those who are about to use it. All these do not disturb the imagination of the audience. The *Ostad* might himself play a character role if this became necessary.

The portrayal of fighting is co-ordinated with the sounds of the clashing of cymbals and the beating of drums. In the first step, two characters stand face to face and feint an attack but do not follow through. In the next step they cross each other side by side,



The villainous Shemr, in character-defining red costume and feathered helmet.

then immediately turn and start fencing. It is traditional to represent a wounded character in a winding-sheet when he is going to fight. He leaves the playhouse, and an enemy chases him off. When he returns to the *Tekiyeh* he is in a bloody and torn sheet. To break the news of a character's death, among various conventional methods is the literary symmetry found in Old Persian literature: the returning of a riderless horse to the scene.

As in medieval and Elizabethan theatre, the actors are men and boys, who play all the parts including those of angels and women. The children who appear in the piece usually represent the children of the principal local families, and their appearance in this solemn religious enactment is thought to bring a blessing upon them and their parents. Their acting does evoke the proverbial 'well of emotion', but it would be mistaken to say they merely observe specific conventions in the process of performing. Characters of the

Taziyeh are known already, and the writer personally elaborates or exaggerates aspects of their nature.

The actor endeavours to imitate the tone of voice, words, and characteristics suitable to the image of the person he stands for. He also dons costumes in particular colours which are synonymous with the audience's perception of the character. Those playing the role of the Imam usually wear clothes (including a cloak and turban) of green and white, their faces often covered by a white, short veil, as a further inhibition to dramatic empathy. Shemr and his assistant usually wear red outfits, comprising a coat of mail and a helmet adorned with swan feathers.

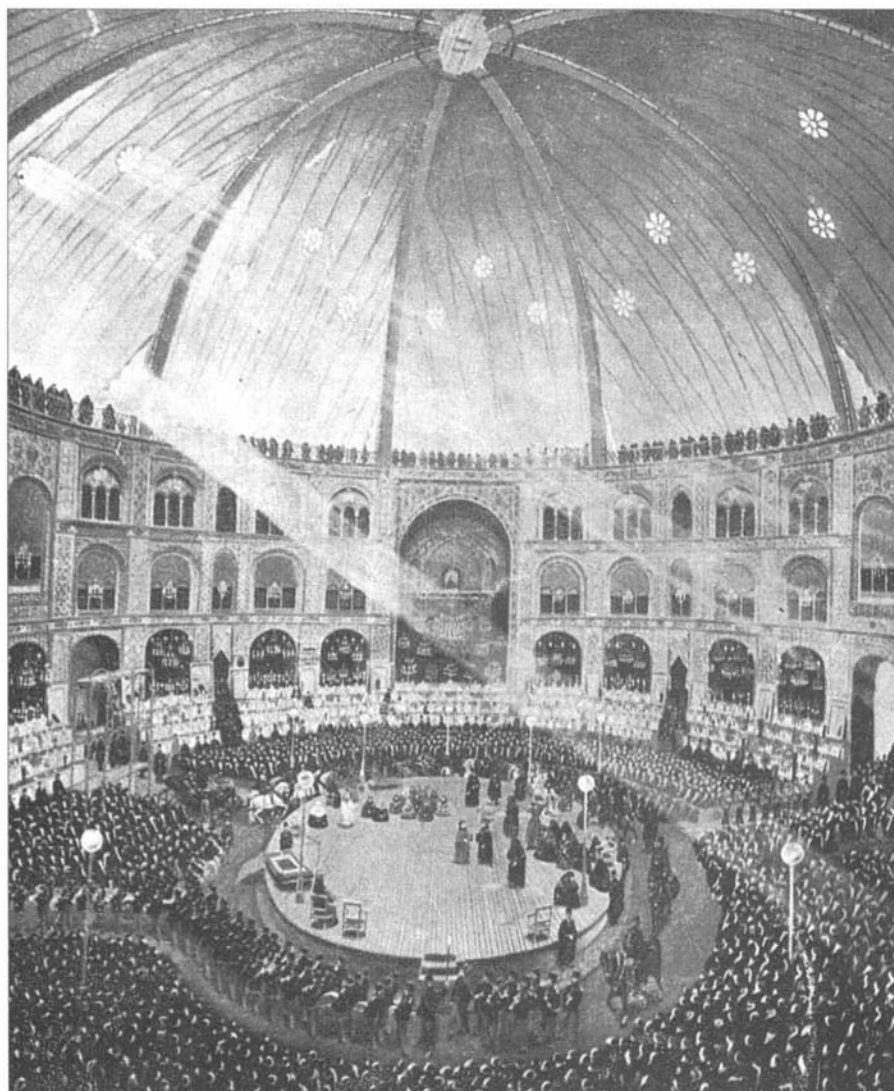
Historic accounts detail elaborate, rich, and bejewelled costumes for the court, but Peter Chelkowski, though confirming this point, believes that today, if no appropriate costume is at hand, any that differs from the usual dress of the audience is acceptable. But, wherever possible, costume conforms to certain symbolic conventions. As Chelkowski writes: 'In the western theatre the use of everyday dress for historical characters has been practised for some time as a shock device, but in *Taziyeh* it has been traditional.'¹⁵

Design and Props in the *Taziyeh*

Design and setting in *Taziyeh* utilize a special technique which would probably not be acceptable to western theatregoers or set designers, but which *Taziyeh*-goers accept as familiar. They are unperturbed when they see two actors holding a door, without any surrounding walls, as the entrance to the house of the Imam or when they see a chair in successive scenes, as a throne in the court of Yazid and as a humble object in the tent of the saints.

Props – except for the real ones, such as swords, shields, lances, and heads – are symbolic. For example, a pot of water stands for the River Euphrates, the trunk of a palm tree for a palm grove.

Minimal sets and props are used. Though decor is sparse, costumes and properties are not. Properties contain extremes of both realism and symbolism. The angel Gabriel holding an umbrella might



The Tekiyeh-Dowlat, a state playhouse built at the whim of the Shah Nasir al Din in imitation of the Royal Albert Hall.

suggest that he has descended from Heaven, and the actors find tomb, mosque, harem, and camp where they are told to find them. Symbols are easily recognizable by the audience.¹⁶

Given that the *Taziyeh* is usually performed in the open air, there are no conventions governing the size of the playing area, and it is possible, given the space, that, if opportunity presents, appropriate spaces outside the playing area can be utilized for horsemen to gallop around.

A significant departure from presentational 'poverty' came at the beginning of the twentieth century with the building of the Tekiyeh-Dowlat, a state playhouse built at the whim of the Shah Nasir al Din in imita-

tion of the Royal Albert Hall, which the Shah had seen on a visit to Europe. The performances were on a grand scale, with properties such as shields and swords studded with jewels borrowed from the Royal Museum, while the coach which Napoleon presented to Fath Ali Shah – and the eight horses pulling it – was borrowed for one performance of *Taziyeh* for use by Yazid and Shemr.

Generally, *Taziyeh* props can be itemized as follows: drum, sword, dagger, boots, water-skin (or water container which is used by the character of Abbas), shield, which is one of the implements of warfare, mail (mesh chain-mail), helmet, vessel (suspended by a chain and carried by a dervish), head, bowl of water, veil, clock, scarf, cymbals, corpse, harmonica (small one), trumpet, mace

(club), standard (flag), rope, bow and arrow, lion-skin, horse, litter, and straw. The musical instruments are kettle-drums, cymbals, horns, clarinets, and various trumpets. The props are multi-functional, and semiologically 'read' differently according to the way they are used. Hussein's bed becomes the bed of his general; a chair can, when the situation requires, signify a hill, and then again function as a chair.¹⁷

Any group of *Taziyeh* players provide their own props and outfits. These are usually kept – in a poor condition, despite the value of some of them – in a room of the house of the responsible member of the group, or in a small storeroom of a mosque under the care of the same member.

The Language of the *Taziyeh*

The style of the language of the *Taziyeh* is of three main kinds – rhetorical poetry; dialogue, which can be straightforward and direct but can also ally itself to the poetic rhetoric; and the more idiomatic style of the comic scenes, which draws heavily on folk plays and is closer to western dramatic usage. At its best, drawing upon custom and past precedent, it uses a form of vernacular poetry, loose and full of common expressions and metaphors. The poems express sensitivity in a simple and direct manner, without resorting to overblown rhetoric and artificial conventions. Having said this, the writer is at liberty to elaborate or reiterate as he feels necessary to elicit an emotional link between performers and spectators. The texts are anonymous and often co-operative, drawing heavily upon past precedent and quoting liberally from other works.

Because of the folkloric simplicity of the poetry, it functions effectively as a direct and powerful channel of communication when combined with dramatic art. Over the two hundred years of its recorded existence, *Taziyeh* has been involved in a kind of evolutionary process, and changes in style now bring it (albeit unsuccessfully) closer to the elegiac mourning poetry of the Kajar period. Some *Taziyeh* writers have heavily plagiarized older, classical sources and the work of more accomplished poets in order to achieve greater poetic strength – borrowing phrases,

changing a few hem-stitches, adding or subtracting some couplets. Some writers have over-indulged themselves in their imitation of cited works.

Rhetorical poetry is employed in such sections as a declamatory invitation to combat. Here, *Shemr* enters the stage from behind the backdrop.

From Kufa I come with legions numerous,
To join Ibn Sad, the commander luminous,
This perfumed land, ah, it's a sight to embrace
A barren desert turned into a market-place
As if the antelope's musk spilled onto this plain
Or King Solomon laid down goods from his train.¹⁸

The second type, or dialogue, bridges the formal rhetoric of the above, moving closer to realistic interchange. In the following passage, attributed to Mirza Mohammed Taqi Al-Buka (1859–73),¹⁹ there is a mixture of the colloquial and the rhetorical representative of the very best of *Taziyeh* poetry. The dialogue occurs when Imam Hussein, astride his horse Zoljenah and about to depart for the battlefield, is confronted by his little daughter Rughiyeh, who is standing on a raised area and cries out to her father. With no musical accompaniment, and in heart-rending childish tones, she pleads with her father in broken blank verse.

RUGHIYEH: Father, you're going away, leaving me an orphan.

THE IMAM: O, Heaven above, what trials have you wrought?

RUGHIYEH: Father, after you're gone. Shemr will bind me up.

THE IMAM: He will bind you and your sisters with a chain.

RUGHIYEH: Daddy, my throat is so parched I'm burning.

THE IMAM: I too am burning with thirst.

RUGHIYEH: Father dear, let me tell you something.

THE IMAM: Tell me, don't cry, Rughiyeh, my little daughter.

RUGHIYEH: Get down from your horse. I am sad.

THE IMAM: (*dismounting and walking toward Rughiyeh*) May the Lord have mercy on the Shi'ites, my little darling.

RUGHIYEH: Draw an emblem on your battle dress to serve as my light.

THE IMAM: (*caressing Rughiyeh*) My eyes. O light of my eyes.

My little one, my little prisoner.



The martyrdom of the Imam Hussein, in the setting of the Islamic Cultural Centre, London.

RUGHYIEH: Let me go father, I'll kiss you under
your throat. (*She kisses him under his throat.*)
THE IMAM: Kiss me, O my soul.
I am a sacrifice to all your hopes and dreams.

The scope for presenting comedy in *Taziyeh* is limited. The essential motive for creating a comic scene comes from a wish to ridicule the antagonists by making them appear to be buffoons. Hereupon, the spectator of *Taziyeh*, who has been downcast by the enemy of the House of the Prophet, is lifted up when he sees the enemy made abject. In other words the *Taziyeh* spectator revenges himself upon the enemy with a boisterous laugh.

In the performance of the *Majlis of Mokhtar* (1992), we see the son of Ibn Sad mourning over his father's corpse in a comic manner:

O you *Mokhtar*, the brave man,
I fear you,
You have made me an orphan.
(*He picks up the head of his father.*)
O my dear father,
I am ready to die for your ass-like head.
O my dear father,
I am ready to die for your boar-like teeth.

The material from which the *Taziyeh* are composed is largely literary in origin. The compilers have drawn on this stock, strung it together in various combinations, composed standard linking matter, and added other non-literary embellishments, but in general have contributed nothing original to the material on which they have worked. What is original is their moulding of that material into a dramatic form. Tracing the origins of the language of the *Taziyeh*, Jamshid Malekpour has pointed to two prominent epics, *Khavar-Nameh* (*The Book of the Orient*, 1451) and *Hamleh-Haidari* (*Haidari Attack*), as primary poetic sources, linking their recitation in ceremonies of mourning to the later development of the *Taziyeh*.²⁰

Jaber Anassori, in the preface to his translation of the *Taziyeh* manuscripts collected by Enrico Ceruli,²¹ points out:

Scribes of *Taziyeh* generally ask readers to pray for them out of mercy. They complete their plays asking for forgiveness or for praise and redemption. At the end of most *Taziyeh* manuscripts could be seen these words: 'The end, finished', along with

the signature or the finger print of the writers, in the corner of the last page of the manuscripts.²²

Music in the Taziyeh

Khaleghi believes that *Taziyeh* is one of the best means of conserving and preserving much of national Iranian song. He writes:

I have seen *Taziyeh* in small *Tekiyeh*. There I have fully understood that music, in religious plays, is of great significance. Since I was interested in this artistic technique I endeavoured to take part on any occasion of *Taziyeh* performances. I should point out that what causes people to be moved is the hearing of doleful songs sung by a singer with a fine voice.²³

And *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* has the following on the music and its role in *Taziyeh*:

A *ta'ziye* invariably includes dialogue between soloists representing the protagonists of the narrative and verses sung by the entire group. Variants of a single melodic pattern usually link several exchanges between soloists and group, each phrase incorporating repetitions, transpositions, or prolongation of smaller melodic shapes. Military instruments of western origin (side drum, sometimes with trumpets) are occasionally used.²⁴

Shahidi introduces kettle-drums, cymbals, horns, clarinets, and various trumpets as *Taziyeh* instruments, but stresses that 'separating the music from the literature is not the most profitable way' to study the form. He adds: 'We should always recognize the relationship between these basic components.'²⁵

None the less, I shall briefly look at the modality and role of music in the *Taziyeh*.

Music through songs has an important role because a fine singer, in this genre of spectacle, can exert great influence upon the spectator. Because of this, young men with fine voices were often selected as apprentices, and served under a Master of Music, in preparation for a role in *Taziyeh*. This process was instrumental in producing men who were masters in the art of vocal technique. Those who play saints must have a high pitched voice in order to sing the traditional notes (*kies*) of Iranian music. whereas villains merely need to shout rhythmically.²⁶

The song assigned to each actor depends on his rank and the part he plays onstage. The Imam Khans have a pleasant and delicate tone to their voices, and sing their songs in sober manner. In sensational episodes, different kinds of songs match the mood.

In the case of their opposite numbers, the evil antagonists have coarse and rude voices, and utter their vocals in a monotonous and unpleasant style. In this respect it is worth looking at Shahidi's comment on the technical skill and use of veteran performers in *Taziyeh* during the course of performances in the *Tekiyeh-Dowlat*. He writes:

Master *Taziyeh* performers occasionally changed mode and tone as the action demanded. They even introduced unique rhymes and rhythms to the traditional dirges. The music, the voice, the face, the physique, and especially the particular role assigned to the performer were of prime importance to the spectators. Some veteran actors developed their own personal styles. These performers made unique contributions to the development of *Taziyeh* music. For example, some invented special methods of poetry recital. They developed excellent timing, an ability to lay stress on certain words and phrases, and an ability to rise or lower their voices along with many other theatrical gimmicks.²⁷

During the late nineteenth century there was a considerable development in the nature of the *Taziyeh*. New and improved scripts were commissioned which set an example for future writers (not often successfully followed, but serving as a standard to aim at). The popularity of the form increased as a public spectacle and entertainment, as did opportunities to bring in dramatic appendages which had little to do with religious observance. The most influential of these developments came with the building of the *Tekiyeh-Dowlat*, where the space encouraged spectacular elements to be introduced into the *Taziyeh* for the delectation of the growing middle classes, who were accustomed also to attend other forms of entertainment on a European model.

I heard last night in the *Tekiyeh-Dowlat* the *Majlis* of *Solaiman's Abbey* was performed. On this night English and Italian ambassadors with their subjects were invited. When the *Taziyeh* was ended the famous comedian Ismael Bazaz accompanied

by two hundred actors and musicians clothed in Iranian and European costume entered the *Tekiyeh* and began to fool around in such a manner that *Taziyeh* became worse than a show.²⁸

The original event, in some *Taziyeh*, was diverted to include a new story. Characters in new form were shown in strange manner. In the *Majlis* of *Fatimah Goes to a Wedding*, the actress was shown in an European outfit with hat. Sometimes for the sake of the comfort of spectators, an interval, between two sad acts, was suggested and then a short joyful melody or play was performed.²⁹

Different Types of Taziyeh

Three distinct forms of the *Taziyeh* emerged from the changes in the *Tekiyeh* Dowlat spectacles, and to a lesser extent elsewhere:

1 As long as *Taziyeh* deals with the incident of *Kerbala*, in commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, it is celebratory, and appeals to the emotion or feelings of the audience. There is nothing intellectual or important that the audience has to contemplate. Apocryphal *Majlis*, such as *The Death of the Prophet Mohammad*, *The Murder of Ali*, and *The Captivity of Hussein's Family in Damascus after the Massacre*, could be included in this category. In tradition this form is known as *Vagheh* (signifying 'main theme').

2 Those plays in which the story is taken from the events of *Kerbala* but the events are framed by other stories with Koranic and Biblical themes are teaching plays. In tradition these are called *Pish Vagheh* (signifying 'subsidiary plot').

3 The third type, in tradition called *Gusheh*, has, in substance, little or no direct relation to the main event at *Kerbala*. These plays are purely fantastic, humorous, or satirical and are purely for entertainment, without striving to promote any other values. The *Majlis* of *The Christian Daughter* and that of *Tying the Thumbs of the Devil*, fall into this category.

Elements which properly belong to the last category have, however, frequently intruded into the first two. In one *Majlis* of the first kind, the Imam Hussein has a conversation

with a lion which wishes to come to his aid, while in the *Majlis* of *The Conquest of Khaibar* the court of the villains contains a fortune-teller of grotesque appearance and actions. In some *Majlis* absence of taste or a sense of ambition has led to such intrusions not being limited to comic interludes, but assuming major proportions, and the inflated rhetoric in which they have been dramatized has tended to tip the seriousness of the action into bathos.

Today *Taziyeh* is performed at any time, but in particular during the months of *Muharram*, *Safar*, and *Ramadan*, in most cities of Iran. In Tehran, the Centre of Dramatic Arts, as the state organization, has invited *Taziyeh* groups from different parts of the country to perform *Taziyeh* using Mehrab Hall as a *Tekiyeh*. In 1990, this centre established the Department of *Taziyeh* and Traditional Arts Activities for the study of these arts, and the department is inviting *Taziyeh* experts to give their comments on amending *Taziyeh* texts, with a view to their publication.

Currently *Taziyeh* activists are not expecting other playhouses as elaborate as the *Tekiyeh-Dowlat* to be built or rebuilt, since it is possible to perform a *Majlis* of *Taziyeh* wherever they wish. Not even a box office is needed, since the performance is always free of charge. Well-to-do people or even a single individual serves as sponsor for those performing *Taziyeh* in the traditional style. Every Friday for more than twenty years, for example, *Taziyeh* has been performed in the courtyard of a house of someone who has made a vow to this effect, in return for a small payment to the *Taziyeh* group.

After the dethroning of the last Shah, under whom the *Taziyeh* was the subject of restrictions, and the establishment of the Islamic republic of Iran, *Taziyeh*, along with the *Muharram* observances, was free to carry out its activities in public. It has been defined both as a passion play and as an indigenous drama, but while its traditional function as a religious observance is clear, there are aspects which some find unacceptable in this respect. For example, violent action, gashing oneself with knives, pricking the arms and cheeks with needles, and so forth – all com-

mon among some of the demonstrators of Ashura – were strictly prohibited immediately following the constitutional change. In addition it is felt that *Taziyeh* manuscripts and the modality of its performances require urgent reconsideration, if the form is to continue to fulfil its role as a didactic drama and to seek to reinforce ideological morality in religion and politics.

During the first decade of the new rule in Iran an innovation was explored by some young *Taziyeh* activists who had graduated from the Dramatic Arts Faculty of Tehran University, Azim Musavi amongst them. Their idea was to combine five *Majlises* – *The Damascus (Sham) Bazaar*, *The Martyrdom of Imam Hussein*, *Abbas*, *Ali Akbar*, and *Hurr* – into a new *Majlis* or play with the name of *The Tradition of the Devotion (Ravayat-e jonon)*. This play was performed in Molavi Hall in Tehran in 1991, when Musavi and his group presented a performance which compounded *Taziyeh* style and European staging, but paying regard to most traditions of the *Taziyeh* – particularly the polarity between saints and villains.

Amir Dejakam, another graduate student, attracted by Musavi's ideas, created a new play based upon the *Majlis* of *Moses and the Desert Dervish*, performed on the stage of Rudaki Hall in 1991 in Tehran. Both these attempts to attract new audiences to the theatre were influenced by a growing familiarity with the European drama, which will hopefully assist activists to develop some of the unrealized dramatic features of the *Taziyeh* without losing any of its vital traditions. Otherwise their efforts will not be accepted by the common people, and *Taziyeh*-goers in particular, and the attempt to build a theatre audience while making the *Taziyeh* a more sophisticated form will fail.

Notes and References

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2. Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967); and *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).
3. William O. Beeman, 'Cultural Dimensions of Performance Conventions in Iranian *Taziyeh*', in *Taziyeh: Ritual, and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter J. Chelkowski (New York, 1979), p. 25.

4. Martin Banham, *Cambridge Guide to World Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 670–1.
5. Peter Chelkowski, *Taziyeh: Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran* (Tehran: NIRT Publications, 1975), p. 4.
6. Mehdi Forough, *A Comparative Study of Abraham's Sacrifice in Persian Passion Play and Western Mystery Play* (Tehran, n.d.) p. 4, 44.
7. Quoted in M. Baktash, 'Taziyeh and Its Philosophy', in *Taziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, op. cit., p. 105.
8. Jalal Asgar, *A Historical Study of the Origins of the Persian Passion Plays*, dissertation presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School, University of Southern California, 1963, p. 228–9. See also Cornelius Le Bruyn, *Travels into Muscovy, Persia, and Part of the East-Indias* (London: A. Bettesworth and Co., 1737), p. 215–16.
9. P. Chelkowski, 'Bibliographical Spectrum', in *Taziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, op. cit., p. 257.
10. Quoted in J. R. William Hanaway, 'Stereotyped Imagery in the *Taziyeh*', *Taziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, op. cit., p. 187–8.
11. Quoted in Matthew Arnold, *Essay in Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1932), chapter on 'A Persian Passion Play', p. 239–40.
12. Quoted in Andrzej Wirth, 'Semiological Aspects of *Taziyeh*', *Taziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, op. cit., p. 38.
13. Peter Brook, 'The Ring of Harmonies', *The Independent on Sunday*, Arts Section, 21 November 1993, p. 29.
14. Andrzej Wirth, op. cit., p. 33.
15. Peter J. Chelkowski, op. cit., p. 17.
16. Quoted in Metin And, 'Taziyeh: Tragedy in Islam, its Conventional and Ritualistic Elements, its Dramatic Values with Reference to Greek Tragedy, and its Significance for the Modern Theatre', *International Theatre Year Book*, 1970, p. 39.
17. Andrzej Wirth, op. cit., p. 35.
18. The dominant translator of *Taziyeh* is Sir Henry Pelly, who translated a host of manuscripts in the middle of the nineteenth century. Pelly's translations are time- and culture-bound and say more about English poetry than Iranian religious drama. In this article more modern translations have been used in examples.
19. Mirza Mohammed Taqi was a well-known *Taziyeh* producer who lived in the middle of the reign of Nasir al-Din Shah. He gave performances in Tehran and the *Tekiyeh Dowlat* theatre between the years 1275 and 1290. See A. H. Shahidi. op. cit., p. 60.
20. Jamshid Malekpour, *Persian Passion Play* (University of Tehran, 1987), p. 24.
21. By far the largest collection of *Taziyeh* scripts was assembled by Enrico Ceruli at the bidding of the Vatican, in whose library they are now lodged.
22. Jaber Anassory, translation of *Elenco di drammi religiosi persiani*, Fondo Mss. Vaticanicerulli (Tehran: Gostash-e Honar Publications, 1989), p. 22.
23. Quoted in Rouhollah Khaleghi, *The Story of Iranian Music* (Tehran, 1974), p. 332.
24. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol. IX, p. 299.
25. A. Shahidi, op. cit., p. 41.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., p. 44.
28. Quoted in Mostofi, *The Historical and Administrative History of the Qajars* (Tehran, 1934), p. 591.
29. Hiva Goran, *Kosheshay Na Farjami (Tragic Effort)* (Tehran: Aghah Publishers, 1979), p. 77.