

# Iranian Traditional Religious Theater In Contrast to the Modern Theater and Especially Absurd Theater

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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to identify and scrutinize the Iranian traditional religious theater in contrast to modern theater and particularly absurd theater. Therefore, these two types of theater (different concept, components, and elements) will be compared and assessed, and their similarities and contradictions will be stated, reviewed, and criticized separately. This study has also concluded that the modern theater has gone beyond the rituals and traditions and religions and sometimes has forgotten and even ridiculed them. Though in some cases, some traces of religious beliefs can be found in the midst of a handful of new and modern words released in the modern theater.

**KEYWORDS:** traditional theater, modern theater, religious theater, absurd.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although the theater has roots in religious rituals, but in a broader sense and in the present era, the modern theater can not be referred to the rituals and traditions, because those who founded the modern theater, were seeking a purpose and meaning beyond the rituals and traditions, as far as in their first step, they broke traditional frameworks to define and portray the theater in a way different than it was (Alvarez, 2002).

By using a distinctive definition for modern, absurd theater and Iranian religious traditional theater, and the recognition and separation of characteristics of these two dramatic kinds, an attempt has been made in this paper to challenge the way in which Iranian religious traditional theater confronted the modern, absurd theater and at the end, the role which religion can play in the modern theater will be criticized and investigated.

### Traditional theater

"When we look at the traditional sense of the theater, our approach is focused on traditions and rituals which established the essence of theater. For example, the rites done at the funerals, weddings, wheat harvest or pray for rain all were full of dramatic motions and actions. Rituals and traditions are considered as raw materials from which the theater needs to feed on to keep it alive. Theatre is not something apart from the religion and traditions and when speaking of traditional and ritual theater, we mean that we intend to concentrate our focus on the roots of theater or ritual (Avini, 2008).

### Religion and religious plays

Theater is one of the seven arts. Those who have investigated about the origin of theater, consider the rituals as the origin. Rituals are religious and social ceremonies, like weddings ceremonies or mourning ceremonies of Muharram (called sine-zani) in Iran and special dance ceremonials in other countries (Elyadeh, 2009).

Man has always loved to have dominance on events that are out of his will and desire and this is the main characteristic of theater.

### The religious and traditional play types in Iran

#### Minstrelsy:

The Art of minstrelsy and storytelling are one of the most ancient common arts in human communities. This Art is also of very ancient history in Iran and existence of various stories in the oral literature of various ethnic groups living in the land supports this claim.

Iranian the traditional plays were and dare of various kinds, the most important of which in terms of how to take advantage of the later equipments and role playing include: 1 - musical narration 2 - Pardekhani 3- narrated show. Musical narration is one of the most ancient forms of minstrelsy and

According to the documents, the oldest minstrels who did this kind of storytelling were Parthian goosans whose jobs were followed by Sassanid minstrels in later centuries and the melodies of Kin-e-Iraj or Kin-e-Siavash in

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ancient Iranian music is a proof for this claim. Another style of minstrelsy is narration by using images. In the Islamic era, especially during the Safavid dynasty this narration style became substantially common and we can see some examples like “Shamayel-gardani” and “Parde-khani”, that because of their usages in promoting Shiism, they were considered to be important. Another style of minstrelsy is narration by using written texts. In this style as the title suggests there was less role-playing (Beizaii, 2001).

But another form of minstrelsy to which more attention has been given by theorists and historians of Iranian play and theater history is “narrated show” which relied on narrative capabilities in role-playing and the representation of various characters in the story and it was done by a minstrel just using his possibilities of expression and his body (Tajdini, 1993).

**Puppet shows:** Some types of Iranian puppet shows we can mention are: “Saye-bazi (playing with shadows), “PahlavanKachal (Panj)”, “Haji Mobarak”, “KheimeShabBazi” “Shah SalimBazi” “Kham bazi” “Jiji-Viji”. These shows experienced their peaks during the Qajar era.

Among the traditional Puppet Shows "PahlavanKachal (Panj [five])", enjoyed considerable popularity in which five dolls of PahlavanKachal, the teacher, the bride (the girl), VerverhJadoo (Satan) and Rostam had a central role. Another famous Iranian puppet show, which already is more common and mostly is known as “KheimeShabBazi”, is "The Court of Shah Salim" or " Shah Salimbazi"( Rahnavard,2002).

**TakhteHouzi:**Iranian exhilarating plays are usually known fortwo terms,FirstTakhteHouzi, which refers to the location of these plays which was a platform made by laying down some planks or a bed on a pool in the courtyards of houses and the second is imitation which is the exaggerated playing style of these works(Tajdini, 1993).

**Female imitations:** During the Safavid era, there existed some vocalist female groups that performed various types of dances and small musical plays behind closed doors in private feminine parties. These play mostly revolved around women and feminine issues and problems. (Rahnavard, 2002).

**BaghalBazi (which means the grocer play):** This play is rooted in the small plays which are about disputes between the master and the vassal and the master craftsman and the apprentice and had been common among Iranians for a long time and it was largely based on dialectical comedy and clownish actions and physical confrontations. The growth and development of this small play in Qajar era eventually led to a play which the public called it BaghalBazi.

**Ta'zieh:**Ta'zieh (or ShabihKhani [similar utterance]), is a kind of Iranian and Shiite traditional and religious play, which is primarily about the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and the passion and suffering of his household pbuh. Because the art of reading lyrics in Ta'zieh is more important than the performance style and showing the events, in comparison with the RouzeKhani, it also has been called Ta'ziehKhani.

**Absurd Theatre:**Absurd (nonsense) Theatre refers to a kind of theater which includes a wide range of works by playwrights of the decades of fifties and sixties, such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, and the decades that followed such as Tom Stoppard and Harold Pinter. Conceptually, the Absurd Theater is closely related to nihilism from different angles. A multidimensional relationship which is followed by lingual plays, exaggerated stereotypes, repetition and irrelevant combinations or even innovative phrases from the tongue of personalities in a tragedy of comedy who are usually captured by compulsive circumstances and unpleasant, unconscious stresses. It passes through classic narrative techniques and then makes fun of it, and consequently always at least resembles a tinge of surreal atmosphere and visualizations. The bitter buffoonery which bears considerable aspects of tragedy from the realm of narratives to the jokes and improvisations of Commedia dell'Arte (or Italian Comedy). Fundamentally, this dramatic form constantly remains experimental over the lifetime and despite the great impacts it has gained consistently from different currents, it has been looking for a new style to provide or break down the narrative frameworks. The unique witness of such incentives, technical and contextual differences between the works of masters including the ones mentioned above, is this trend (Rahnavard, 2002).

### **Iranian traditional religious theater in contrast to absurd theater**

“Theatre is the same as personalities. Theater is language and speech. It belongs to a society which no longer exists. Watching it is like visiting a museum. Just like watching precious things, which are separated from the time and preserved under a glass, and belong to another era and period”(NazerzadehKermani, 2003).

Since the arrival of European theaters to Iran, Iranian drama and theater have been a concern for our intellectuals and writers. Namely, the writings of Fath Ali Akhondzadeh and Mirza Agha Tabrizi, although they had not reached to an independent status and position yet, but the story and the characters imply that these texts are Iranian. And After that, Molière and Shakespeare and the others’ literatures are rewritten and adjusted in a right mood for Iranian people (Nasle Sharif, 1997).

What is inferred from the phrase composition of “Iranian theater”, is that when theater is established side by side with an Iranian, such a term concept finds an objective meaning. Theaters came to our country about 150 years ago.

The goal is to get people to a high culture via theaters and this art is a tool at the service of cultural development. In the beginning, the theater along with schools and newspapers becomes a key element for an open and highly cultured society in our country (SeyyedHossein, 2004).

Therefore on the early arrival of the western theaters to Iran, we were structurally following the mythical (classical) structure like the rest of the world. But following the twentieth century, according to the crash of this structure and attention to the new schools, now it is also possible for us to be a follower for existing European schools or even by liberal thinking and the autonomy create our modern and creative schools (Nalbandian 1976, 1961).

. But "once the the western literatures translations begins to prosper in Iran from Qajar era onwards, other forms of theaters were entered into the the areas of production and performance which are heavily biased to stage performances and additionally follow a different structure. With this introduction Forsi stated that in a classic play, a subtle and reasonable dialogue will entertain the audience but in absurd plays, the dialogues take steps toward rant and transformation. Words will be essentially worthless and everything happens in the stage. Stage events become more important than what is said and even they are inconsistent with it most of the times. The absurd theater, cares for the words worthlessness. Absurd theater is a poem that must be manifested through the clear and observable images from the stage, itself. In the these images, the speech elements still play an important role. But what happens on the the scene, goes beyond the scene dialogues and is often inconsistent with it.

Through the expression of a confusion feeling because of a lack of ultimate certainty and reliance and confidence on rant, Absurdist Theater is something similar to a genuine and religious demand of our times. But in none of Forsi works the dialogues have such a condition. They are not rants, nor have the stability of classical works. In some of the Forsi's works, the dialogues are inclined to rants. But on another level, Forsi gives enlightened luster and color to his dialogues. Dialogues devoid of meaning, but with a deep appearance, something just the opposite of what the absurd writers' dialogues are.

"Dr. Tooma: The night goes on, but in fact the day has started ... No! Do not make mistake. I'm not on a mission from heaven. But I do not want to commit suicide either ... We are falling into the valley of an inner life. We guess, we analyze for ourselves. Judgment and then we bury everything quietly in our brain. Silent unseen burial. No force can imprison your intelligence... Your eyes could not open to release. Yes, even the eyes of this ancient mirror are turned away from the the truth ... "(BoorkhatIbrahim, 2005).

"Girl: (on his own) it is useless, everything is useless, (one) Must survive, Must grow, Must become green, Must see that others become green. I wonder, I feel down from day to day, I shrink, from you! I may grow from outside... (Silence) If I were just a tree." (Bodies Nik, 2000)

Nalbandian's works are alike. He also does not offer any images about the emptiness of life." Through clean and neat and logical dialogues, seasoned with politics, philosophy and many other issues, he presents the discussion about the truth mirage in the form of quite poetic and literary expressions.

And ultimately we are faced with a short description, sentiments [about the self], not the self, nor the lives" (Bodies Nik, 2000).

"Akshig: You seem to search for someone like me.

Yakhshag: he was a man.

Shigakh: a man

Khashagy: a lover.

Akshig (ridiculing)": a lecher one?

Yakhshag: No, no, a thief

Shigakh: How nonsense. Going such a difficult way looking for a burglar.

Khashagy: Wait, maybe this is not an ordinary burglar.

Shigakh: unusual Burglar?

Akshig: Maybe.

Khashagy: of course.

Shigakh: how?

Khashagy: It is obviously, all the burglars are not alike. Each one have expertise in a different field.

Akshig (to Khashagy): What about your field?

Khashagy: We've had a good time together (angry) do not insult me.

Akshig: You are a politician.

Khashagy: and not a thief.

Akshig: They are conjoined. "(Bodies Nik, 2000).

Another issue that Forsi deals with is playwriting technique. Forsi wants to struggles against dramatic traditions to change them. It should be said that in a a country in which the theatre is still an emerging art and from "Mirza Agha

Tabrizi" until Forsi, still does not come about a century and a half, theatre still has not found his style yet and whatever exists, is related to the others. Forsi is going to change what?

There is absurdity in a Forsi's works already. First of all, absurdity exists in the theme of playwrights. But absurdity is not in its artistic sense, but in an ordinary meaning. Subjects of playwrights seem ridiculous. For example, in the Playwright "pot", "a boy and girl are in love with each other. Her father dies and the boy does not like the girl any more. "Or in "spring and doll" An enlightened man who is tired from everyday life takes refuge to a dead love. He fights with the woman, makes a reconciliation, becomes merciful, annoys the woman and finally, at the end of the playwright, a two-handed saw comes down at once to separate the man and the woman. "or in the playwright "The breaking sound", "Farhad has a friendly relationship with everyone. Everyone likes Farhad. But he commits suicide so that "Tootia" (Farhad's fiancée) and "Ramin" (a friend of Farhad) marry each other. " In the the works of absurdity writers, the irrelevant meaningless dialogues move toward a meaningful direction. But in Forsi's works, no meaning goes beyond the appearance of the the dialogues.

In the several works of Forsi like "Spring and Doll", "pot", "the sound of breaking" the theme is the absurdity of contemporary life but in a different style from the writers of this school, in a completely rational and logical manner, Forsi deals with proving the absurdity. But the absurdist theater takes some step further from this ascertainment which is the style of "Sartre" and "Camus" and explains the scene images. Generally speaking, in playwrights the audience is watching the absurdity but in Forsi's works the audience is a listener for some discussions about the absurdity. Absurd plays often have a circular structure which means that the end point is the starting point of the playwright. These playwrights are not storytelling about a man involved in a challenge and therefore are not dramatic in its classical meaning. They are not constrained to storytelling to have a conclusion. They just want to give a suggestion of a poetic image. In classical works a thought proceeds with a reasonable manner and at the end it has a political, religious, ethical, and ... message. In classical playwrights, we have a determined and specified structure. But in absurd playwrights, the image is the transfer agent of thoughts and conditions and this is why these plays are inert. In absurdity playwrights the theme gradually becomes evident but this theme is very complex. And when the nature of playwright theme is understood, a complex image will become apparent. These poetic images convey to the audience, the author's sense of wonder which he experiences in encountering with human suffering. The success or failure of these works should be measured by the conveyance of these poetic and ridiculous combinations to the audience which in turn is related to the quality and power of poetic images and these should be investigated with objective criteria. These objective criteria are based on elements such as the power of induction, the originality of creativity, the mental truth of images, their profoundness, and also on the experience with which they are converted into the scene and stage terminology. The theater of absurdity is the theatre of situations. This theater illustrates the tragedy of human life, a man facing a critical situation. But this encounter is ridiculous. The characters of this play are ridiculous either. Their movements and behaviors are meaningless apparently. Rather than recognizing these people and sympathizing with them, the audience of these plays laughs on their fates. But this feature is not seen in the works of Forsi and Nalbandian. The characters are not ridiculous and mostly elicit the sympathy of the audience.

The effect of playwrights such as Beckett, Ionesco, and Arrabal on Abbas Nalbandian is completely clear. But he has had the ability to completely make the theme an Iranian one. The themes of death, annihilation, and inversion of ethics occur in all the works of Nalbandian.

"Theatre is an art for all the eras. Theater is the language of communication between humans and generations and accordingly updates the components of its structure based on the changes of its content and by modernization of production concerns; it has adjusted itself in accordance contemporary world" (Dehghani, 2006). One of the differences between traditional Iranian drama and modern theater is amount of using written texts. As Flor has stated "In traditional plays of Iran, with the exception of fictional plays and religious dramas, written texts were rarely used and the actor's actions were based on their improvisations.

But in modern theater, there is almost no sign of improvisations and one of the basic fundamentals of the theater is text and playwright." (Elyadeh, 2010). Perhaps before we go to our desired topic of religion and the modern theater, it might be more useful to recall this sentence of "Brown Besley" in *Journal of Religion and Theatre*, who says:

"Although the modern world despite of all relationships of today's world, has apparently kept away from religious thinking, and has found tendency towards the tools, materials, philosophy, and the newer components, but in its essence, and wherever there is a meaning in human life, it has been associated with religion."

Nietzsche believes that the contemporary human has been generally isolated from all humanitarian values, especially of religious and divine values. But Norman A. Brett has said somewhere that "You could say that religion binds us to transcendental forces, which surround us with creation and recreation of myths and theater whether its

contents are secular or not, to meaning of the word is a religion." (Kingzyurg, 2009). After referring to the a statement of Norman A. Brett, we can say unlike Nietzsche's idea of modern human; Perhaps, by means of tool such as theater, he is unconsciously associated with, religion and spiritual values And, he has understood the religion in new ways.(ForsiBahman,2006).There are many similarities between theater and the official religions which have made us to see the theater as a religion. Firstly, the theater has all the parts of a religion. In center of all official religions, lie the invocational rites, namely a religious play system. Invocational rituals, recreate the myths by speech or a prayer and religious spells. Those who use (perform) invocational rites, clergymen or priests, always wear special clothes to emphasize on their actions, and use different items to perform rituals, they use special containers, symbolic weapons canes , candles and things like them. Ritual plays mainly occur in a sacred space, which is built for the same purpose; namely temple.

We do not need to think too much to find out that all of these elements are present in the theater, too. The myths, played and performed in theater, will accept the form the plays and are implemented through spoken words and actions,the dialogues and actions, are similar to religious rituals and prayers. Instead of a clergyman, the theater uses an actor who wears a play dress instead of wearing a clerical dress and instead of ritual and religious tools, uses the accessories. All performances occur at the presence of the audience and on behalf of the society mainly in theater, which has been built for this purpose namely a temple for these religious affairs. Religious Art (Islamic Art), is a synonym for sacred art which delivers the divine message to the human and it is beyond the time and space And has origins in abstraction universe and the sublime realms of the existence, and it has taken root from the upper world and manifests itself in the physical world.(Haverz,1978).

But it is not an art which is abstract and entirely cut off from the realities so it can only deals with divinity and become neglected of temporal and everyday life ,but It is grounded in reality and away from the deception. Until now, the western art-scholars have mostly spoken of Islamic art and architecture from a historical point of view.Sometimes they have pointed to the issues of prohibition in Islam about showing religious faces and their icons and have exaggerated in this regard and even have fanatically judged. Religious art is not the only art which manifests religious beliefs and values.but is also a work by areligious author who enjoys from the faith experience. Here the importance of artist role and his mind and thought, purity of his soul, his ideals and values, and in short words, his "ism", is put forward (Ionesco, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

Researchers believe that the theater is rooted in ritual and traditions.Particularly rituals in which praise and worship of Dionosus (ancient Greek god of wine and fertility) has been implemented.So based on these contents we can reach to this concept that the theater is generally originated from religious rituals, like traditional religious theater in Iran which has roots in Islam. Especially Ta'zieh which is basically a religious drama. In different historical periods and according to the the social, cultural, economic conditions of each historical period, theater took different and often contradictory characteristics to itself. As in the modern age and the modern industrial world, looking for a new meaning and concept, with titles such as modern theater, absurd theater, existentialism theater and.... the theater introduced itself to the world, it first attempted to free itself from any affiliation with rituals and traditions and religious matters, But it was always looking for something that was missing, and an origin to rely on Which was divine and spiritual matters which Amidst the the recent works of some modern writers such as Eugene O'Neill are well understood and can be observed. The entry of dramatic forms and earning experience about methods and styles can be used anyway to serve a purpose and target which any subject and content area expects. Therefore earning experience about methods and styles and using the latest styles is not in contrast with religion believes.

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