

The Endurance of a Living Art

Within the discourse of culture and identity, Iranian theatre has re-emerged as a vibrant scene of experimentation, expression and activism. The last decade has produced a proliferation of young writers, directors, performers and practitioners, and an unprecedented interest in theatre amongst the urban public. This is no surprise as Iranian culture has gone through a massive transformation since the turn of the twenty-first century, putting Iranian artists firmly within the global art discourse.

This artistic shift is the result of a double transformation. On the one hand it is the manifestation of the rekindling of millennia-old creative energies that are undisputedly an integral and primary component of the multi-layered and complex culture of Iran. I use the word rekindling because the injuries of recent history, with the inexorably ferocious dismantling and internal restructuring of socio-political structures, and the deep psychic and real wound of a murderously unwarranted eight-year war, not only affected production but brought it to a near standstill for a period. The relative 'healing' of those assaults, which came with the evolution of the historical process, unleashed an insatiability to communicate and reflect, a rejuvenation of expression, and an unprecedented multiplicity of approaches to an aesthetic view of life. The intellectual energy has gone beyond the didactics of time and place towards a new self-reflection that has brought the individual to the fore, more than ever before, and the infinite possibilities of expression that come with it.

On the other hand, there has been an external transformation of the global cultural world, which has allowed 'fringe' cultures, such as that of contemporary Iran, access to the global arena, and to what was until recently the domain of western dominance and discourse. As the distance between the fringes and the centre is straddled by the 'other' cultures, we are witnessing a development towards a shared sphere and unitary reality. Such a trend removes the artificial distance between the west and 'indigenous' cultures, allowing for a true synthesis of expressions about the totality of the human experience.

The idea of Iran conjures up contradictory images and representations not just in the mind of the outsider but in that of the Iranian himself. Plurality of images in itself need not be a reason to decipher conflict but rather an astounding diversity, unless the recipient of the imagery is in search of a 'unified' truth and of isolating an ultimately reassuring 'simplified form'. This will certainly not apply in the conceptualisation of the Iranian current cultural reality. Far from being homogenous, contemporary Iranian reality is a mosaic of layered complexities and juxtapositions of opposites - this being itself a significant aspect of its modern condition. The possibility of 'un-unified', dispersed and interchangeable points of view is intrinsic to modern society. Plurality, however, as a structure as well as a condition of being, predates the modern historical process in the Iranian narrative. It is a unique

characteristic that has resulted from the archaeological layering of identities - not unlike Freud's early model of the mind - acquired and accumulated through the consecutive stages of its metamorphous evolution. Whilst the soul of the culture is intoxicated with a quest for archaic idealised abstractions - for it was here that Paradise was conceived - its vitality is fed by the opposite: a totally modern yearning for liberation from all that is archaic or traditional, and a desire for adapting to all that is modern. That simultaneous infatuation with the mythic and the modern means that any attempt at enforced homogenization serves to enhance and compound the innate Iranian drive for heterogeneity, pluralism and now, in its modern state, individualism. This anti-hermeneutic contemporary drive re-instates a complex and variegated picture of the individual and society, and it is this that encapsulates the sophistication of the Iranian phenomenon today.

Even at a passing glance at Iranian contemporary theatre we see that the artists' voices not only reach beyond perceived national, political, linguistic, religious or social stereotypes, but they are also a testament to the hybridisation, fragmentation, and diversity of the contemporary Iranian reality. They manifest a powerful drive for plurality and individual expression and symbolise the radical transformation that contemporary Iranian culture is undergoing.

The recent Barbican season of Iranian Theatre and Video Arts (Iran: New Voices - Nov 25 - Dec 7 2008), which I helped organize, aimed to explore precisely this reality. The aims were two-fold. Firstly, the idea was to explore the new wave of experimental voices, which have emerged over the last decade and are becoming increasingly popular. Secondly, the aim was to create a dialogue between this movement and the pioneers of Iranian avant-garde from the 1970s.

Daedalus & Icarus, a sort of Beckett-meets-Iranian improvisatory comic performance derives its raw energy from the 'crude honesty' of its characters, straddling at once the archetypal and the human, and whose desire for freedom combines immediacy with universality. Made of scraps of metal and three industrial fans the father and son duo assemble together a flight machine - the only object on stage - which is maneuvered by four 'invisible' actors clad in black. Through its engagement and immediacy the 'poor theatre' pretend play feels more real than an elaborately high-tech production.

Away from the existential, *Quartet: A Journey North* by Amir Reza Koohestani and Mahin Sadri is a subtle exploration of the fragile intricacies of human relationships. Set up with four stationary characters sitting back to back under four monitors, each with a camera pointing at them, the powerful poignancy of this talking-head style, psychologically-driven, installation-performance comes from its portrayal of basic human lives, totally avoiding enigmatic symbolism and giving way to a more direct, at once, human and political expression. The projection of the characters' images on monitors

serves to dehumanize and distance us from their reality, alluding to a fragmentation of personalities. Monologue-driven, the impassive performances not only avoid sentimentality, they reduce affect to a minimum - a parody of the very Iranian style of theatrical over-acting and real life emotionality. The mise-en-scene keeps the two male and two female characters in stationary isolation for the duration of the performance, a theatrical language that successfully resolves the officially imposed limitations of contact between genders on the contemporary Iranian stage.

The symposium brought together several major figures of the last half a century (without in anyway diminishing the importance of any other artists) in reassessing the legacy of the Iranian avant-garde. This was a forum for dialogue between generations - a kind of 'healing of a revolutionary scar' that severed the creative process of experimental theatre in Iran across three generations. An opportunity was provided, for the first time since the revolution, to assess the work of the pioneers of Iranian avant-garde whose creative legacy, despite revolutionary disdain, has lived on to witness a new wave of successful experimentation.

Modernity, paradoxically, also produced a kind of safe and castrated form of theatre, which unlike the traditional ritual and improvisatory styles, is on the one hand devoid of spontaneity and on the other unable to create contact with a participatory audience. Urbanised, codified and sanitized, this Iranian theatre took the performer off the streets and out of the courtyards, tents, and bazaars onto an indoor stage to perform to a select audience in orderly attendance. The crossbreeding of imported formal playwriting and the weight of literary Persian heritage has unfortunately also resulted in the firm establishment of various forms of - in the words of Peter Brook - "Deadly Theatre". That is to say, works end up being neither theatrically engaging, nor literary innovation. This 'neither/nor' phenomenon is a serious *malaise* in the evolutionary process. Not surprisingly, the avant-garde practitioners of the 1970s found powerful potentiality in *ta'ziye-khani*.

It is the 'living' quality within Iranian theatre that gives it relevance and empowers it as a driving force and catalyst for cultural change in the contemporary process. There is no surprise why performance of this kind has endured and continues to thrive and enthrall audiences in Iran.

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