



# IRAN MODERN



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# Perspectives on the Shiraz Arts Festival

## A RADICAL THIRD WORLD REWRITING

Vali Mahlouji

**"The philosopher, as a necessary man of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, has always found himself . . . in opposition to his today."**

—Nietzsche

**"One of the distinctive virtues of modernism is that it leaves its questions echoing in the air long after the questioners themselves, and their answers, have left the scene."**

—Marshall Berman

The artistic territory of the annual Shiraz Arts Festival (1967–77) remains, despite the passage of almost half a century, a remarkably contested space. It represents possibly the most controversial trajectory of cultural attitude, policy, and intercultural contact in modern Iranian history. Paradoxically, and apart from Iranian political and cultural sensitivities, the Festival is recognized as one of the most uniquely transformative intercultural experiences, perhaps the most radical multidisciplinary crucible of any commissioning festival in history. Its contested space represents one of the last unresolved artistic complexes of the prerevolutionary period.

The lively contemporary Iranian cultural scene, as we observe it today, is energized by its very resistance to attempts at enforced homogenization through ideological and religious constraints. It is characterized not only by an innate drive for heterogeneity, pluralism, and now a modern individualism, but also by a desire to juxtapose national specificities with aspirations toward internationalism. In a globalized world, Iranian aspirations for visibility, as well as for entry into and interaction within the global cultural arena, lead to conflict within the

groups that control the country's political, administrative, and economic lifelines. Critical contemporary culture in Iran, I believe, strives for the (re)establishment of the very systems of intercultural communication and collaboration that were apparent in the Shiraz Arts Festival some half a century earlier. The relative recovery of intellectual and sociopolitical networks from the 1979 revolution has restored to some degree an intracultural, if not an intercultural, rapprochement with past ideologies. The negotiation of cultural disorientation in Iran operates through deconstructing the contentiously contrived pre- and post-revolutionary complex of paradigms, struggles, and anxieties, in this way ensuring the continuity of the emancipatory modern and contemporary drives within Iranian cultural circles.

Conceptualizing the terrain of the Festival today demands first that we regard it as *historical*—we must pass beyond the value judgments of yesterday and break clear of accepted scripts. Furthermore, critical observation of the Festival's aesthetic and cultural genealogies must steer clear of oppositional paradigms, didactics of time and place, and a reliance on oversimplified, reductive, and dichotomous representations of both the modern and the traditional. Such polarities inform clichéd attitudes not only to the actualities of the Festival, but also to the totality of our contemporary condition, and serve to negate the evolutionary historical process. They serve distortions from within and from without Iranian society to perpetrate the notion of a catastrophic clash of civilizations as initially imagined by Samuel Huntington.

The Festival's publications clearly denote a revolutionizing curatorial opposition to precisely such reductive reactionisms by asserting a democratic relational sphere, both temporally (by





FIGURE 46. Scene from the American production of *Fire* by Bread and Puppet Theatre, 1970. Image from the catalogue for the Fourth Festival of Arts, Shiraz, Persepolis 1970.



FIGURE 47. Scene from the Iranian play *Vis and Ramin* adaptation by Mahin Tajadod and directed by Arby Ovanessian. Image from the catalogue for the Fifth Festival of Arts, Shiraz, Persepolis, 1971.

including a wide spectrum of performances from across artistic historical periods) and spatially (by improvising alternative performing spaces across the city and in the natural setting). Indeed, the Festival self-consciously set out to map coexisting heterogeneous truths within a modern discourse providing meaning to possibilities of disjointed, dispersed, and interchangeable points of view. The pioneering model of the Shiraz Arts Festival proposed what Homi Bhabha called a "third world rewriting,"<sup>1</sup> one that would highlight the discourse of minorities within geopolitical divisions of the first and third worlds, and thereby invent a tradition beyond the dominant (post)colonial western cultural spheres. In this location of culture, the praxis shifted toward the present. The center of gravity of international cultural production and politics was relocated toward the (reemerging) other. In doing so, it champions an Iranian cultural shift toward a modern critical discourse within an intercultural dialogue. The Festival occupied a precociously postcolonial position, posturing as an alternative to the dominant, Eurogenetic, hegemonic view of culture. In its critique of Eurocentrism and its affirmation of non-European sensibilities, the Festival articulated the necessity for putting cultural expressions produced prior to European colonialization by those east of the Black Sea and south of the Mediterranean on the map as valuable and equal. The Festival articulated a paradigm-shifting

arbitration in opposition to, and beyond, the authoritarian hierarchical model of the European *mission civilatrice* (civilizing mission). The process of discovery, deconstruction, and reorientation found a natural ally in the internationally fluid and subversive western avant-garde. The Shiraz Arts Festival became an artistically pioneering world stage proposing a new cultural model for a postcolonial necessity—a global exhibition predating the 1986 Havana Biennale by nearly two decades.

The rhetoric of the Festival, as articulated in its publications, returns regularly to the theme of universalism and the dream of unity calling for, in Edward Said's words, "a postcolonial intellectual project" looking to "expand the area of overlapping community between the metropolitan and formerly colonized societies."<sup>2</sup> This dream of unity rejects any unifying reductionist principle that subsumes world cultures under the rhetoric of a globalized culture. Conversely, it focuses on achieving a fertile dialectical between values of permanence and change, eternal and new, in what Marshall Berman refers to as "a contradictory unity, a unity of disunity."<sup>3</sup> Here, the anti- and postcolonial are complementary, relationally reinforcing and, throughout their juxtaposition, extending as a whole.

The traditions and sensibilities of China, India, Indonesia, Japan, and various African impulses provided abstractive capacities, which resonated with neo-avant-garde drives as they had



done for Nietzsche, Artaud, and others. The performative, represented by the so-called primitive, was once again encouraged to supplant the textual, or European, tradition. The investigation of ritual promised insight into the unconscious world of the collective in line with earlier trajectories of David Émile Durkheim, and Adam Smith on the basis that it brought theater closer to its essence.<sup>4</sup>

With the recent involvement of the Third World, a new perspective has been opened in this theater of evolving forms. As the experiments in dramatic presentation have touched cultural elements not yet deadened by "Broadway" or "boulevard," world theater seems even closer to achieving the goals set by the visionary Artaud. . . . The traditional and folk presentations serve as reminders of the origins of pure theater, created in a specific cultural context, to provide

what Artaud would indicate as 'ecstatic' communications. An important trend of the avant-garde is devoted to developing this kind of expression for an intercultural audience. —*Eighth Shiraz Arts Festival*<sup>5</sup>

Artaudian ideals of catharsis, communality, and return to origins in a "desire to connect with the emotional core of the drama,"<sup>6</sup> for an example, informed the seminal collaborative piece from 1971, *Orghast*, created by Iranians Arby Ovanessian and Mahin Tajadod; directors Peter Brook, Andrei Serban, and Geoffrey Reeves; and poet Ted Hughes. Its performers hailed from Cameroon, England, France, Japan, Mali, Portugal, Spain, and the United States. In a return to ancients, Tajadod and Hughes developed a script for *Orghast* based on Middle Persian incomprehensible even to the modern Persian speaker; its primary intention was the omission of text as carrier of symbolic

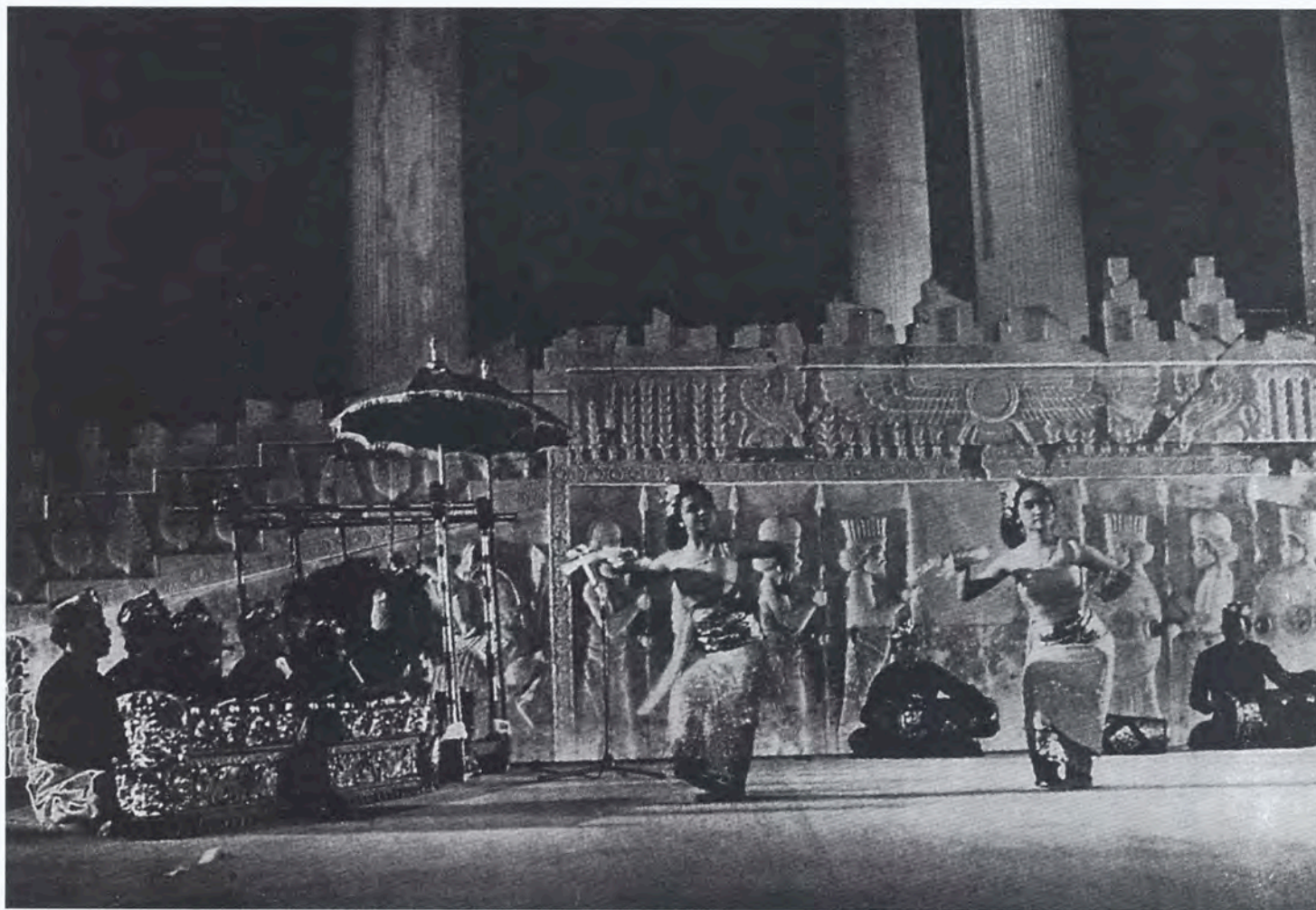


FIGURE 48. Scene from the performance by the Balinese Gamelan Theatre. Image from the catalogue for the Fifth Festival of Arts, Shiraz, Persepolis 1971.



meaning. This was consciously in line with Artaud and Derrida's defense of Artaud's thesis, where "the logical and discursive intentions which speech ordinarily uses in order to ensure its rational transparency" are subordinated "to purloin [the theater's] body in the direction of meaning."<sup>7</sup> Attainment of meaning would transcend the need for rational discourse and bring the audience to alternate modes of consciousness forming a new community "beyond any fixed, stable identity."<sup>8</sup>

Transgressive creativity, however, was not always easily received, as witnessed at an earlier festival:

The Sixth Festival was considered by many to be the most "difficult" to date . . . There was little appeal to "popular" taste, a sure sign that Festival organizers now knew what they wanted and were prepared to present it regardless of critical comment, which was not slow in coming. The controversy that boiled over in normally placid Shiraz was rightly considered part of what the Festival is all about, and as a welcome stimulus to artistic creativity and art criticism in Iran.

—*Sixth Shiraz Arts Festival*

The Sixth Festival adopted a Faustian motto to embrace and contain developmentally necessary cultural controversy, despite, and even in opposition to, popular tastes and consumptions. The disturbance of "orderings of subject and society alike,"<sup>9</sup> what Julia Kristeva calls putting "subjecthood in trouble,"<sup>10</sup> exposing it in crisis in order "to register its points not only of breakdown but of

breakthrough,"<sup>11</sup> became the Festival's own curatorially avant-garde articulation in relation to the Iranian production of art.

Across national agendas and the Iranian cultural terrain, the Festival was aimed at broadening parameters of theory, practice, discourse, and criticality.<sup>12</sup> Exposure and exchange was a means of oxygenation and a necessary aid to enhancing and transforming the cultural sphere. No amount of investment, sponsorship, or residencies abroad have the same efficacious impact as that of creating an actual base for intercultural exchange at home.<sup>13</sup> This was a more democratic model. Affordable season tickets were provided to students, and university dormitories opened their doors and housed students from all over Iran. These enthusiasts mainly came from middle and lower economic backgrounds—those less privileged in terms of exposure to the international scene. Interviews conducted with the younger generation of festival-goers—both performers and spectators—attest to a unique provision for growth, experience, exchange, and exposure.<sup>14</sup> Performance artists such as Reza Abdo, Sussan Deyhim, Susan Taslimi, Shohreh Aghdashloo, Mohammad-Bagher Ghaffari, Atila Pesyani to name a few, belong to the generation who benefited from such exposure.

Attention was focused on critical evaluations of local modes of artistic expression, including the *commedia dell'arte* style *ru-howzi* performance,<sup>15</sup> the reconceptualization of the previously banned *ta'zieh*, ritual performance, and a focus on musical traditions. The late twentieth-century renaissance in Iranian music could be directly traced to the crucial work of the Festival. The Festival commissioned new innovations in Iranian theater such as *City of Tales* (fig. 49) by writer/director/performer Bijan Mofid (the seminal sociocritical play that had been shelved by the Iranian Ministry of Culture) and *A Modern, Profound and Important Research into the Fossils of the 25th Geological Era* by writer/director duo Abbas Nalbandian and Arby Ovanessian. Scores of Iranian theater talents such as actors Parviz Sayyad and Ezzatollah Entezami and writers/directors Bahram Beyzai and Ali Nasirian performed. A fledgling Iranian cinema found an ally and a platform in the Festival, which afforded visibility to Iranian filmmakers such as Parviz Kimiavi, Nasser Taghvai, Fereydoon Rahnama, Dariush Mehrjui, Ovanessian alongside *auteurs*, such as Yasujiro Ozu, Ingmar Bergman, Luis Buñuel, Sergei Paradjanov, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Satyajit Ray and Marguerite Duras, to name a few, and initiated the Iranian artists' entry onto the international scene.

Local Iranian artistic production shared a stage with the likes of Ravi Shankar, Yehudi Menuhin, Rwandan percussionists, performers of Japanese Noh theater, players of Balinese gamelan



FIGURE 49. Scene from the Iranian play "City of Tales," written and directed by Bijan Mofid of the Theatre Workshop, which became the best known piece of theatre in modern Iran.





FIGURE 50. Scene from the Ugandan Dance Theatre performance by Ranga Moi and Robert Serumaga.

music (fig. 48), and Indian *kathakali* dancers. Also featured were Shūji Terayama's avant-garde theatrical creations (commissioned by the Festival) and works by Polish theater practitioners Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Grotowski. Creations by New Yorkers Joseph Chaikin, Romanian-born Andrei Serban, Merce Cunningham, and John Cage, and by Texas-raised Robert Wilson (who was commissioned to create early epic performances such as *Ka Mountain* in collaboration with Iranian performers) were performed alongside the works of Europeans Maurice Bejart, Iannis Xenakis (who had fled the Greek junta), Olivier Messiaen, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Peter Brook, and Núria Espert (who found relative freedom in Shiraz from the dictatorial constraints of Francoist Spain).<sup>16</sup> Seminal works were commissioned, at a time when most of the artists remained marginal in their own countries. Many, such as Stockhausen, found the Iranian sphere without cultural baggage and therefore enjoyed a facilitating and mediating encounter, as opposed to the uneasy dialogues that they likely would have had with their home audiences.

As a global exhibition, the Shiraz Arts Festival's stage liberated a modern space. In doing so, it not only facilitated a liberal space within a dictatorship but also initiated and defined a radical writing back across the specificities of postcoloniality and the fault-lines of the Cold War.

## Notes

1. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (London: Routledge, 1994), 2.
2. Edward Said, "Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World," in *Salmagundi* No.70/71, (spring-summer 1986): 46.
3. Marshall Berman, *All that Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 23.
4. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2005), 32–33.
5. Quotes are taken from the original catalogues of the Shiraz Arts Festival.
6. Arnold Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History*. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 104.
7. Jacques Derrida, "The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 240.
8. Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 228.
9. Julia Kristeva, cited in Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press / October Books, 1996), 153.
10. *ibid.*
11. *ibid.*, 157.
12. Author's interview with Queen Farah Diba Pahlavi, patron of the Festival and Bijan Saffari, architect, artist and co-organizer of the Festival.
13. *ibid.*
14. Author's interviews with Saddreddin Zahed (actor and scholar), Mohammad-Bagher Ghaffari (actor and director), Atila Pesyani (actor and director), and Shohreh Aghdashlou (actress).
15. *Ru-howzi* is a form of comic improvisatory performance in Iran whose roots are obscure. This type of performance has been compared to similar traditions across cultures in Asia and Europe, including Indonesian *ludruk*, Malaysian *borja*, Indian forms and the late Italian Renaissance *commedia dell'arte*. There are reasons to believe that these folkloric traditions shared a common root in ancient antiquity. In *ru-howzi* the central figure is a clown and there are stock figures like the *Haji* (traditional merchant), a king or ruler, a woman (played by a man), a youth, courtiers, and sometimes other specialized characters such as a doctor. The stories are simple and often taken from Iranian folklore and sometimes literature. For further information see William Beeman, *Comic Improvisatory Theater in Iran and its Influence on Modern Drama*, a paper presented at *Iran: New Voices Symposium*, Barbican Arts Centre, London, November 29, 2008.
16. Author's interview with Nuria Espert.



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