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Religion and the Actor: The Art of Mastering Double Standards Under The Theocratic Islamic Regime of Iran

By
Mahmood Karimi-Hakak

"What is interesting in an actor is what he can not do yet he tries," says Joseph Campbell, and thus he summarizes in one sentence what the acting profession has faced within the Islamic Republic of Iran for the past quarter of a century.

Speaking about the actor and his religious beliefs within the world of Islam is indeed a monumental task, which would require years of research and a lifelong dedication of a team of experts and scholars -- a task that is both beyond the patience of this speaker and the scope of this panel. Islam is a huge religion worldwide and there are many different interpretations of Islamic laws within the Muslim societies.

Therefore instead of speaking in general about Islam's treatment of the art of acting, I will narrow my attention to my native Iran, and within Iran's Islamic history I will concentrate on the last twenty-five years, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, which claims to lead the world of Shiite Muslims. And since this paper is not to exceed fifteen minutes allowed, I will further focus on what I personally witnessed in my seven years of theatre and film experience in Iran, from 1993-1999.

The actor, in his portrayal of the character, is indeed in search of an identity. This search finds a more urgent need within a society that oppresses its artists by creating vague limitations that are solely dependent on the interpretation of the officials in charge. Therefore acting under such conditions is often reduced to a series of gestures, which can then be interpreted by the audience, allowing for a more immediate interaction between the audience and the stage.

In his life off the stage, too, the actor is required to put up a "front", to borrow Erving Goffman's phrase used in his 1959 book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, in order to avoid labels of un-Islamic behavior, which will surely follow official objections to the actor's working in his

profession. Thus, an actor's acting is no longer limited to the portrayal of a character on stage; rather, his entire life becomes one big search for both his artistic and his social identity.

"The process of establishing social identity," describes Adam Barnhart in his 1994 essay on Goffman "then becomes closely allied to the concept of the 'front,' which is described as 'that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance.'" And his "Interaction is viewed as a 'performance,' shaped by environment and audience, constructed to provide others with 'impressions' that are consonant with the desired goals of the actor" both on and off the stage.

It is within this unique circumstance that the training of an actor in Islamic society is a mishmash of hurriedly and illogically chosen exercises borrowed from various techniques and adapted, often inaccurately, to the limitations prescribed by the Islamic laws.

As result, in a country with hundreds of schools, universities, colleges, institutions and public and private acting classes, and thousands of interested, dedicated and talented students, only a handful of so-called "trained" actors are equipped to portray even the least complicated characters.

Thus the Iranian film directors (and I use film as an example because the western audience is more acquainted with Iranian films than Iranian theatre) use raw and untrained actors to portray their major and more complex characters.

When an individual is interested in studying acting at the university level in today's Islamic Iran, he or she, like all other incoming freshmen, is expected to go through a series of steps where his or her degree of Muslimness is tested. Religious minorities are exempt from this stage, although they too must abide by all Islamic codes of conduct when in public.

While this degree of belief testing varies from instructor to instructor, and class to class, participation in all classes--including the private ones--requires a certain code of standard behavior and conduct including separation of male and female students, observance of a certain

level of distance, and the use of the plural "you" when addressing or working with people of the opposite sex, and of course the Islamic dress code.

These differences from the way we conduct our acting classes here in the west create a tremendous number of limitations on the instructors' teaching and/or the student's learning process. The enforcement of these laws and regulations is also interpretational and depends on the judgment of the Chair, VPAA, President and the owners and/or directors of the private institutions, and their personal relationship with the in-house clergy whose job it is to represent and enforce the laws of Islam within that specific institution.

All this will call for some very creative solutions to the problems of training an actor. For example, a western-educated female friend of mine who teaches at one of the largest theatre departments in the country has found a solution for teaching breathing to her students that would keep this basic exercise within the limits of the law, while helping her students learn this essential step in their career.

Being a woman, she cannot touch the belly of her male students. Because the Islamic laws do not permit the students to wear tight fitting shirts, she would not be able to tell whether they are actually using their abdomens to breath with. Therefore she devised a creative solution. She had a wooden stick made in a shape of a T with which she could *feel* the students' abdomens without getting close to them.

In another incident, one of my own directing students faced an interesting challenge when he decided to present the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* as his final project. As the laws require, the actors were not allowed to touch one another, nor could they even look into each other's eyes. Such behavior was considered immodest and thus un-Islamic.

This creative student found his solution in casting a sister and brother in the two roles. The school clergy agreed with the scene's presentation only if the director would announce at the start of the scene that these two actors are indeed brother and sister, even though their names printed in the program would have already suggested that such was their relationship.

However, because all these "laws" and "regulations" are totally dependent on the interpretation of the person in charge, in this case the clergy, this same scene was acted by two unrelated actors a semester later, who were permitted to even hold hands, and of course exchange voluptuous glances with each other.

When I questioned the gentleman clergy on his contradictory verdict, he responded that "Surely you know that this [the later] scene is directed by someone who is a true believer and a devout Muslim!" and went on to say that because of her undoubted devotion to Islam, and the Islamic laws, the audience will recognize the "purity" in her direction.

These double standards exist all over the society and students, regardless of where they study, realize early on their journey that an official code of conduct is in force and they must abide by it regardless of whether or not they believe in it.

The actor, therefore, learns to pretend to observe Islamic laws, if he is to have any hope of appearing on stage. Such pretence causes a constant struggle within the actor who may not practice these restrictions at home and/or in private.

The actor is encouraged, on the other hand, by almost all methods and techniques of actor training, to be *truthful* in order to be *believable*. Such a behavioral binary may lead to a kind of artistic schizophrenia, if you will, that I witnessed in almost every actor I trained, worked with, or otherwise came in contact with while in Iran.

"The actor," to use Barnhart again, "in order to present a compelling front, is forced to both fill the duties of the social role and communicate the activities and characteristics of the role to other people in a consistent manner." And because, regardless of the mental state of the actor, the curtain must go up, the actor is expected to find ways to communicate to his audience, his dilemma. Thus, the actor tries to invent a series of often-original verbal and non-verbal symbols in portrayal of the character. These symbols are in turn interpreted and understood by the audience, who themselves live under similar imposed social and behavioral restrictions.

Therefore "believability" is constructed in terms of what the audience knows the actor cannot do in presentation of the character's intentions. This kind of communication between the stage and the audience launches a unique connection that is often more immediate and urgent and thus more risky and at times even dangerous to the authorities.

Therefore a great part of the artists' training is concerned with inventing ways to get around the system, portraying as truthful a character as possible without having their names added to the official black list. Among the most important concerns for the survival of theatre practitioners are:

- For playwrights, choosing subject matter that is of religious significance, i.e. stories about religious figures and their families
- For directors, casting people recognized for their loyalty to the ruling religious figures: i.e., bearded men in positive roles and cleanly shaven men wearing a tie in the negative roles
- For the entire company, observing the Islamic codes of conduct during the rehearsal period and performances.

To an audience not acquainted with the limitations imposed, the effort that is made on the stage may go unnoticed. For instance, in a production of a popular Iranian play, a few years ago, two young characters, a boy and a girl, collaborated together to achieve a small victory over their rival group.

Ecstatic with their simple victory, they jumped joyfully in the air to give each other a "high five". Suddenly their hands froze midair. They pulled away their hands; looked directly at the audience and murmured "Oh, Oh. That was close! The whole production could have been in trouble."

The audience cheered. My companion, who had returned to Iran for the first time since the Islamic Revolution, could not understand the reasons for the audiences' enthusiasm. I explained: "It is un-Islamic for a man and a woman to touch. That is why these two stopped

their hands from touching in mid air. The audience cheers to let them know that they understood their point."

A few months later, I saw a play directed by a person who was considered a *devoté* of the regime and thus was less likely to have his work censored or restricted. In this play there was a bedroom scene in which a man was to woo his lover—here, for the sake of the public's chastity, changed to his wife.

The creative director staged the scene in such a way that its content was communicated to the audience beyond words. A bed was placed in the center of the stage with the man and the woman standing on each side of it facing the audience. The lines were directly delivered to the audience, thus avoiding any possibility of eye contact between the two.

There was a basket of fresh cucumbers in front of the male actor. He passionately peeled the cucumbers, one by one, working his way from the smallest to the largest. As he spoke, he handed them to the woman, who eagerly ate each and every one of the cucumbers as she delivered her lines. The audience cheered violently, at times even making arousing remarks.

This scene, I was told, was modified after the night I had seen the play, which was during the first week of its performances. The director was forced to add other fruits to the basket and change a few of the sentences. However, there is no doubt in my mind that, were the director someone less known for his or her loyalty to the ruling Islamic ideologies, the entire scene or even the whole play would not have received performance permission.

The theatre officials and/or agents of censorship are not the only cultural authorities in charge of protecting the public's chastity. An objection could be raised by a single audience member even after the play has been *observed* by the officials and received performance permission. These objections may be as simple as a gesture, a contact, a glance or a line, whatever that audience member, often placed in the theatre by the authorities themselves, would deem immodest.

In my own production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* an objection was raised to a point in act 2, scene 2. In this scene the actor playing Hermia was to push Lysander away when he attempts to lie next to her in the woods. Knowing full well that they could not touch, I had blocked the scene so that when Hermia makes a pushing gesture toward Lysander, he would roll away from her. There was at least 10 inches distance between the two.

An objection was made because, to quote the official from the Office of Observation and Evaluation of Theatrical Activities, "There may be a seat among the audience where, from the angle of a person sitting in that seat, he may think that the actors touched." We had to increase the distance to satisfy this Office.

It is interesting to note that during the same period another play of Shakespeare, *Richard III*, was performing in the center of Tehran, in which Richard actually kneeled down and kissed the hand of Ann. Again the response to my objection was the degree of loyalty of the other director to Islam and his apparent observance of Islamic laws.

It must be mentioned that as I experienced it first hand, often one's degree of devotion is not measured solely by one's practicing the teachings of Islam, or even the length of his beard (as was the case in Taliban's Afghanistan), but by the amount of bribe that one can afford.

After all, it is a common practice--at least in the Islamic Republic's interpretation of Islam--that one can purchase back one's missed prayers to the almighty, thus paving his way to the Promised Land through his pocketbook. Therefore, paying for one's artistic sins is not totally out of place.

Within the first couple of years of living in Iran (right after my first film was pulled off the screen), a friend of mine--himself a world-renowned film director--came to console me. He gave me an invaluable word of advice. "Now that you have come to live and practice your art here", he remarked, "remember! Everyday when you leave your home to meet with the officials, to secure permissions required for practicing your art, you must take a few masks with you.

One for each encounter." Facing my amazed look, he continued jokingly, "Do not worry, you can put them all back into the closet once you return home."

Obviously I did not heed his advice. *Midsummer* was raided and closed down, and I was prosecuted for *Outrage against the public decorum*.¹

To summarize, in a society where an artist's work is judged by the degree of his supposed devotion to a certain set of laws and regulations, or to certain ideology (and I am talking about the Islamic Republic of Iran), the actor's artistic survival does not depend on his talent, creativity, knowledge and training, or even who he know in the business.

What it does depend on is the length of his beard, the sign of worship stamped on his forehead and his apparent devotion to the Islamic ideology, all of which are buyable if the actor had the right price to offer.

He is therefore wise to learn the art of lying, mendacity and dishonesty instead of honesty, sincerity and presentation of the truth. And yet, as Shakespeare reminds us in *As You Like It*, "the truest poetry is the most feigning" (3.3.16).

Even under Islamic regulations, which seek to preserve decorum over truth, theater practitioners find indirect ways to convey their truth to the audience. In contemporary Iran--as throughout theatre history—the arts adapt to restrictions imposed upon them, and through their adaptation, new styles are created.

¹ [During his presentation at ATHE, the author told us that the judge gave him three choices as punishment for his crime: to pay a rather large sum of money, to spend a couple of years in prison, or to receive a number of lashes. Mr. Karimi-Hakak told the judge that he chooses the lashes. The judge asked him why. Mr. Karimi-Hakak told the court that when he returned to the United States, he wanted to show them his professional resumé by removing his shirt and displaying the scars on his back. Outraged, the judge ordered him to leave both the courtroom and the country. After some time of harassment, Mr. Karimi-Hakak and his family left the country. – Editor's note]