

PERFORMING IRAN



Location

Wagner Theater,
Theater and Dance Department,
University of California, San Diego

Schedule

Saturday, February 22, 2014

9:00 a.m.

Welcome and Introduction

Babak Rahimi (*UC San Diego*)

9:15-10:30 a.m.

Keynote Address

- ◆ Mahmood Karimi-Hakak
(*Siena College*, Professor of Creative Arts)

"Iran is the Stage and the Youth, Its Major
Players: A seven-year excursion into
Contemporary Iranian Theatre!"

10:30-10:45 a.m.

Break

10:45-12:00p.m.

A (re) Look at Naqqali

- ◆ Gordafarid
(Naqqal and Intangible Heritage Researcher)

“The Art of Naqqali: its Past
and Present”

- ◆ Shahroukh Yadegari (*UC San Diego*)

"Staging Scarlet Stone: Moving Images and
Interactivity at the Ghahvekhooneh"

12:00-12:45 p.m.

Lunch Break

12:45-2:00 p.m.

A (re) Look at Taziyeh

- ◆ Tourj Daryaei (*UC Irvine*)

“The Performance of Pain, Remembrance and Revenge in Late Ancient Iran”

- ◆ Roshanak Kheshti (*UC San Diego*)

“Taziyeh and videos of rooftop chanting after the 2009 elections”

- ◆ Elmira Mohebbi & Sara Soleimani
(*UC San Diego*)

“Segregated Gaze: the Constructed Gender divide in the Taziyeh Audience”

Moderator: Babak Rahimi (*UC San Diego*)

2:00-2:15 p.m.

Break

2:15-3:15 p.m.

Theater of (After) Revolution

- ◆ Roxanne Varzi (*UC Irvine*)

“Acting out: Contemporary theater in Tehran”

- ◆ Torang Yeghiazarian
(*Golden Thread Productions; Founding Artisti Director*)

- ◆ “Dramatic Defiance: Tehran 2010”

Moderator:

Elham Gheytonchi (*Santa Monica College*)

3:30-3:45 p.m. Break

3:45-5:15 p.m. ***Restaging Iran in Exile***

- ◆ Elham Gheytonchi (*Santa Monica College*)

“Theater of Exile and Censorship in Iran”

- ◆ Rana Salimi (*UC San Diego*)

"Performing glimpses of the past in diaspora”

- ◆ Staci Scheiwiller
(*California State University Stanislaus*)

“Iranian performance art and video art in
global, local, and transnational contexts”

- ◆ Allia Homayoun (*UC San Diego*)

“Troubling the Home/Land in HBO’s
Homeland: The Ghost of 1979 and the
Haunting Presence of Iran in the U.S.
Imaginary”

Moderator: Roxanne Varzi (*UC Irvine*)

5:30-5:45 p.m. Break

5:45-7:45 p.m.

DRAMATIC READING: *444 Days*

(A play by Torang Yeghiazarian
Golden Thread Productions;
Founding Artistic Director)

Q & A

***Free and Open to the Public**

Sponsored by Iran Media Program at the Center for Global
Communication Studies (University of Pennsylvania), Third World
Studies, UC San Diego & Program for the Study of Religion, UC San
Diego.

***Directions:** <http://theatre.ucsd.edu/places/parking.html>.

***Parking is free at UCSD during weekends.**

Iran is the Stage and the Youth its Major Players: A seven year excursion into contemporary Iranian theatre

When I was asked to speak here today, I began looking through my notes for a book entitled *A Theatre Purified*. Then it dawned on me that I will probably be speaking at a gathering of scholars and educators and, talking from personal experience, I think there is nothing more boring than talking to a bunch of scholars about yet another research in a field they are all experts in. And who wants to be boring? So I decided to tell you a story. My story. A story about how I ended up going to Iran. What made me stay there, and Why I left.

Twenty-five years ago, teaching at Towson University I seized an opportunity to combine Sufi practices with Grotowski's technique in a production of *Seven Stages*. The play was constructed as a three way dialogue between Jalal-al Din Rumi, Forough Farrokhzad, and seven young American actors. The production opened in Spring 91, moved to Baltimore Theater Project in early summer, and performed at the Edinburgh Theater Festival, Fringe, in August. In Edinburgh, I met a Latvian theatre troupe, who saw every performance as preparation for their own play, *The Story of Billy Goat*, a daring, beautiful and captivating piece. They invited me to work with them the next summer. On my way to Latvia, I decided to stop in Tehran to see my aging mother. I never made it to Latvia. The 10-day visit turn into a 7-year stay. Seven years that, like candles on Yalda night, shines through every window of my memories.

You are probably curious as to what makes someone with a moderately healthy mind leave an American faculty position to go to Iran. Well, here is the story:

After the first day at my mother's, which of course included visits from all her neighbors in the other 11 apartments, I called my old friends, fellow students and professors. Many were no longer there, some were either in jail or out of the country, and few were executed in the 1988 massacre. Some of my old professors asked if I would speak to their students. I welcomed the idea. At one of these lectures I was scolding the students for being lazy in comparison to the students in my generation. A brave young woman stood up and spoke. With a combination of pity, anger, and envy apparent in her voice, she cried out:

"You are here bragging about what you knew and we do not. How you worked so hard on your studies and we do not. How you spent 24/7 in the theatre rehearsing and performing, and we do not. What you fail to realize, Sir, is that it was your generation that created this revolution. I was just a small child at the time, and had no part in your decision. And as soon as your generation realized that this was not what they had expected, they left, leaving my generation to deal with the aftermath of what they had started. We did not ask for this, nor did we have the means to leave like they did."

She paused. "For all these years not many worthwhile books have been published. Our progressive artists and intellectuals, those who could not leave, are either dead or in jail, or, as Forough so eloquently observed, 'Swamps of alcohol and Opium have dragged them down to their depths.'" Then, pointing to the professor, she continued, "With very few exceptions, we are being taught by those who are chosen not because of their knowledge in the field but because of their loyalty to a certain ideology, or so they pretend. These people hardly know much about anything." The class seemed to agree. Looking directly into my eyes, she added, "What many of us struggle with, Dear Sir, is trying not to sell our bodies to pay for our tuition. I cannot believe that you have the audacity to come here and chastise us!" I didn't know what to do or say. So I just stood there. After what seemed like hours of deafening silence, dropping her head down, almost pleading, she added with a sigh, "And then of course you will leave too!"

Her words pierced my heart. I could not keep my balance. My feet gave in under the heavy weight of my wounded heart. I dragged myself to the stage steps, and like a lantern folding on itself, I crumbled down. I could not control my tears. I felt my face became wet and burning. My entire body was wet. Wet, but cold. It was as if I were soaked into a bathtub of freezing water up to my neck, with a hot shower pouring down my cheeks. I cried, loud and long. She cried too. My professor cried as well. Almost everyone in the class cried. It was an utterly depressing scene.

After a long time, I felt my professor's hand on my shoulder. I looked up. He was old, much older than he was at the beginning of this session. His face was wrinkled like that of a ninety-year-old woman. He reached for my arm, and helped me up.

I stood up, wiped the tears off my face and looked in her direction. She realized I needed her to be able to stand straight, to gain back my energy. She lifted her head and looked into my eyes. In the shining mirror of her watery cheeks, I saw the images of my forefathers. I saw the wisdom of Cyrus the great delivering his final speech. I saw the bravery of the last Persian soldier resisting the Arab invasion. And I saw the glowing face of Forough Farrokhzad as she cried, "...and thus it is / that one dies, and another remains."

I stood erect. Took a deep breath, and with a shaking yet determined voice I promised her, I promised my old professor, and I promised myself that I would not leave.

* * *

During the first year of my stay, I met a group of intelligent young people who took it upon themselves to educate me about the country and people I had been so far from. I soon learned that the Iranian youth are very different from my generation. These *kids* knew how to live life, what to do when and who to approach how. In short they had mastered the art of communication through tolerance, understanding and dialogue. I learned that unlike my generation who knew what

they did not want, but did not know what they wanted, these youth know exactly what they do not want, but they also know what they do want. They let me into their gatherings where I witnessed conversations, discussions and arguments covering all grounds, society, politics, art, etc. What was interesting, however, was that they genuinely seem to have two ears and one mouth. What I mean is that, while in my generation every disagreement or argument ended in a fight, betrayal and animosity, practicing the laws of *my way or the highway*, my young friends endured each other patiently. Even when harsh and impolite accusations occurred, they took the time to listen to the opposing point of view. And when not convinced, they agreed to disagree, promising to continue the dialogue further and in future. I realized my young friends' information is not limited to the theories printed in books, but to observation and situations they risk. They showed me how each group's personal, religious and political beliefs, and their participation in certain rituals, traditions, and ideologies identifies what is needed to help them overcome these boundaries. And, what a time consuming effort that is.

Driving from a party where we ate, drank and danced all night to a religious ceremony one Ashura morning, a young friend asked, "how do you suppose we can help people understand and respect each other?"

"Why do they need to understand and respect each other," I asked ignorantly. He responded, "Don't you think if we want to live in the same society as one nation, we must at least respect one other?" I was speechless. He added, "Otherwise, we will continue facing what we have so far: One group rules another forcing them to abide by their laws." The driver added her voice, "And there we go again, Revolution after Revolution!"

Lets look at few minutes of what I saw that day.

[ASHURA CLIPS, Link to \(Video #1\)](#)

My observations that day made me believe the people have come a long way in their mutual respect and acceptance even since my last visit in 1984.

Then, walking down **Seeye Tir** street, not far from where we were just now, I saw a young woman stopped by a middle aged couple. Apparently performing their religious duty of "Amre be Maroof," they objected to her wearing lipstick. She did not really argue, and said she'll clean it up as soon as she buys a napkin. The woman, sounding relatively sympathetic, said, "Here I have a clean napkin. Let me wipe it off for you," and she did. Suddenly a stream of blood jolted from the poor girl's lips. The girl screamed with pain as the man shouted, "This is what you get for walking around with lipsticks, you whore!" I was astonished, not only because what just happened, but also by the fact that many people, young and old saw this, yet none objected. As he pulled me away from the scene, my host whispered, "You'll be treated even worse if they know where YOU come from,"

Now, less than a decade later my young female companions and I not only walked through the crowds you saw, but were even invited to dine with a family we met that morning. And at lunch, my friends, who had more make up than the girl I mentioned sat without a head cover, and were treated fine by all including the men and a boy who participated in Ghameh Zani. We talked about Islam, revolution, the government and, of course, my life in America. At one point when a discussion between the boy's mother and one of my female companions, over the rationality of the boy bleeding for someone who died 1400 years ago, was getting heated, his father calmly resolved the quarrel by stating "Eysa be dine khod, Mosa be dine khod!"

On the drive home, listening to Moody Blues, I couldn't help but think that something must have changed in this society, and the youth ought to be credited for that. Dropping me at my mother's apartment, a friend noticed my puzzled face. She said smiling, "didn't someone say 'Revolution is not a dinner party?' Well, change doesn't happen overnight, does it?" They drove away leaving me anxious about the next lesson!

Twenty years later, the continuation of these efforts leads to passages unheard of in such celebrations. Lets pay special attention to the lyrics, and the youthfulness of the crowd as we look at Ashura in 2012.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acOT7UM1fSo>

Back to my visit.

Toward the end of my first year in Iran, I was invited to teach one course at Tehran University. Even though only a dozen advanced students were registered, frequently many more were in the room. We talked about interesting productions, discussed their development process, and chatted about Shiraz Arts Festivals of the early 70s (they had only heard about it.) Students showed interest and enthusiasm. They often stayed late, and few even accompanied me to my mother's apartment directly across the north gate of the university. Then I was asked to apply for a full time position. I loved the idea, but there were questions on the application that I didn't feel comfortable answering. So, my teaching stopped.

Some students, however, did not give up and asked if we could have a private workshop. Nine of us met at a painter's studio three times a week. The lessons began from where I always start, the Self. We explored our creative impulses, practiced channeling and examined my directing technique. We also studied literature, arts and philosophies of our cultural past, and experimenting with modern concepts. We argued about function of the arts in a society infested with superstitions and contradictions. And tried to understand ways in which artists, as change agent, may help bridge this divide. This group is now among leading filmmakers, actors, painters, authors and of course, prisoners of conscience.

Meanwhile with my friends' recommendation, I saw some exceptional theatre pieces created by the youth, as well as more "proper" works produced by people of my generation.

All productions must be approved, and are budgeted by the Center for Performing Arts. While some receive especial funding, others, often works of young artists, are shoved into infested damp basement corners with little or no support. I found the latter more creative, exciting and sophisticated, with more audiences present.

Let me give you couple examples:

At a production directed by a well know theatre artist, with an unbelievably large budget there were forty actors playing to a house with less than two dozens audiences. In conversation with the director, a young man questioned his approach to the text. Instead of discussing the vision, the director, almost red in the face with anger, called the man uninformed, ignorant and disrespectful.

Later that same night, I went to see Jean Genet's *The Maids* performed to standing room only by three young women underneath the steps of **Taatre Shahr**.

At talk back, the ensemble responded to questions and criticisms with such care and patience that was even beyond my endurance. I join the cast party where about twenty people, cast, crew and their friends, were gathered in a small apartment talking about the production flaws and accomplishments in an honest and non-judgmental manner.

Few days later, yet another incident made me even more hesitant to hang around people my own age.

A famous poet took me to see a production that had received grave reviews. We met five other reputable artists and intellectuals at the theatre, and were ushered in to our seats in the front row. It was a good production but not one that I would give it standing ovation. My friends, however, stood up and cheered loudly when the director joined the cast on stage. Pulling me up by my shoulder, my poet friend said, "Stand up. He is looking directly at you." I stood up and applauded. We went backstage, met the director and the cast. People in my company visibly tried to outdo each other in praising the play. The director asked what I thought, and I responded that there were many wonderful moments in the production. He smiled.

We weren't much further than a hundred feet from the building when someone in the group said, "What a piece of Shit that was!" Another responded, "What did you expect, the guy doesn't know his ass from his elbow!" And a third added, "I don't know how he gets these huge budgets for such lousy work?" The fourth commented, "Well, he knows whose ass to kiss."

I was literary about to throw up. Using a stupid excuse I split and took a cab home where a soothing bottle of homemade vodka was waiting for me.

[PHOTOS OF THEATRES. Link to the slide show \(# 3\)](#)

Back in the workshop, my students insisted that I should direct a play so they could see my process at work. So I approached the Center for Performing Arts with a proposal; an adaptation of the Epic of Gilgamesh. There was no official response. Needless to say, it would take me another five years and 124 proposals to receive permission to stage a play.

There fore, unable to do theatre, I decided to produce a film. The generous support, persistent teamwork, and unselfish attitude of my young collaborators are the only experiences worth remembering. Otherwise the odyssey of ***Common Plight*** included intimidation, ideological conflicts, misdirection, shenanigans designed to frustrate, prejudice and a host of other distractions. All of which were conceived and executed by petty-minded individuals closer to my own age, both bureaucrats and artists.

[A CLIP FROM COMMON PLIGHT \(Video # 4\)](#)

We all have our limits. I reached mine in spring of 96. So I reserved a return ticket to America, and headed to Ershad Ministry to get an exit stamp on few videos I shot in Iran. But something happened that made me postponed my departure indefinitely.

At a chance meeting, a young woman responded to my inquiry about her education with, "I studied lies!" She explain, "I studied history. And history is nothing but lies." We spent the next six months walking all over the city, eating Dizzy at every forbidden Ghahvehkhane, and talking about what the youth her age have gone through. She was in second grade when the revolution happened. Everything changed over night. She could no longer play with the boys, show off her long curly hair, or even wear the green sneakers she loved so much. Then there was the War, and she turned to religion. Prayed every night till morning. Fasted more days than required. Attended the local mosque, and cried profusely at every sermon. But she grew older and saw the treatment women received, experienced the hypocrisy of school officials, religious leaders, and the Basiji brothers. Now she was hopeless and depressed with a split identity between the two opposing worlds of her private life and public persona. Every night, climbing Darake Mountain, I kept thinking of her stories, and similar ones I had heard from others. Every morning returning from my nightly strolls I adjourned my departure another day.

Three months later, one afternoon, I was working on an essay when two young men knocked at the apartment door.

"We have come to study with you," said one of the young men introducing himself as son of a respected film director.

"I don't teach anymore," I responded politely.

"Yes, we know," said the young man, "Yet we were told to come to you."

My mother brought tea as I continued writing. The young men each took a book reading it quietly. By ten O'clock that evening, I asked them to leave because I was going for my nightly stroll. They decided to come along. We walked quietly for about two hours. On the way back, they repeated their request. Again, I refused, this time using the excuse that two men does not a class make.

A month later, I was working with five men and five women in a run down space, which we had transformed into a working studio. For ten months the group worked inside an absolutely private setting where the door was lucked from inside and no one disturbed the flow of our explorations. At times the synergy reached such heights of creativity that is the dream of every theatre artist. We worked in the evening, climbed the mountain at nights, and traveled to the fields where in moments of ecstasy we disappeared within the vastness of the universe.

I often define the peak of ensemble exploration as reaching a state of artistic orgy. We achieved that many times. Twenty years is passed, the participants of that workshop are now leading artists, administrators and teachers. Some are still friends, and some have not spoken together for years, but none have exposed the details of those workshops.

My twin daughters were born in December of 1997. By this time I was teaching full time, lecturing about western cinema at a gathering of liberal minded high clergy, most of whom since been disrobed and/or imprisoned, and our house had turned into a congregation for the youth.

Again I was encouraged to direct. This time, however, my young collaborators secured all the necessary permissions. I translated Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into Persian poetry, and in the absence of assigned space we rehearsed in my mother's living room. Although the production was inspected number of times, and performance permit was issued for 45 shows, the play was raided and closed down on its forth performance exactly 15 years ago at this moment. I was charged with the crime of "Raping the Public's Innocence" and summoned to the court of Islamic Guidance. Even though proceedings remained inconclusive, we received many death treats, the last of which was against our then 18 month old twin daughters.

We left Iran in June 1999.

An account of the 124 proposals and our *midwinter nightmare* is recorded in an article entitled "Exiled to Freedom" published in The Dram Review, 180, Winter 2003.

Here, however, let me screen a condensed version of a full-length documentary that was made 30 month after the closing night of Midsummer.

SHORT VERSION OF DREAM INTERRUPTED (Video # 5)

Let me conclude by reiterating my delight about the role the youth play on the stage of our country today, albeit some depicting negative characters. The most important of which, in my opinion, is that the old tradition of **Pedar Salari** has given way to a new practice of **Farzand Salari**. The western convention, at least in its theatrical illustration, springs from the myth of Oedipus, where the son replaces the father as ruler. The Iranian tradition stems from the story of Rostam and Sohrab, where the father must overcome the son, even if by deceit. We have remained faithful to this convention all throughout our history, Revolutions after Revolutions. It is this principle that made my generation follow the lies of an old con artist who claimed he has no political ambition of his own. And it is still this same outlook that makes some of us wish the present white bearded despot realizes his errors and changes his ways. It is also because of this that some believe change is only possible if it descends from the top, hence their search for a leader in “the this” or “the that.”

The Iranian youth have no such illusion. Both in art and in life, they know they will not reach their deserved potential by following the ways of the past. They also know that they cannot inaugurate the future without understanding the foundation on which they are to build it. Thus our young brothers and sisters study their cultural past much more rigorously than we did, and follow the foreign manuals and instructions much less religiously than us.

As we recently witnessed, this generation is the first who demanded change in a peaceful uprising unprecedented in our history. And, yes, when they realized that the society has not yet reached the desired level of acceptance and tolerance, they pulled back, retreating to the drawing board of education. Thus preventing the trap that we now see many others who, perhaps blindly, followed their lead, fell into.

I have nothing but admiration for this generation, and nothing but high hope for the future of our beloved Iran.

Thank you