

Evolution vs. Revolution: The Greens Progressive Play within the Iranian Political Theatre.

The word “progressive” as is used in my title refers to both; the play’s progression forward in its stages of development, and the unique progressiveness of its nature and composition.

This socio-political production genre, through the use of many elements of past and contemporary events, enters a post-contemporary mode, performing for post-contemporary audience, and requiring a post-contemporary critic for its analysis.

Although like many of its predecessors, the Iranian Green movement aims to change social values and structures, unlike the ones before, it does not try to replace one tradition with another. Hence the use of “Evolution vs. Revolution” in my title.

What we have witnessed in Iran in the past six months, present a play that its pre-production dates back to a decade earlier, the 1997 election of Mr. Khatami. Yet, it is essentially different from the other uprisings that our recent history has witnessed.

In the past, other movements aimed at “change” in political traditions, have either began or ended with a Revolution, that is; a substitution of one social and/or political system with another. The new system, then, soon became corrupt and unbearable, thus making way for another uprising aimed at yet another change. Iranians in particular have experienced this over and over throughout their history.

This time, however, the situation is different. While the people of my generation, to give one example from the recent past, knew what they did not want, they did not know what they wanted. Therefore once the play reached its climax, and they were able to rid themselves from what they did not want, the movement was highjacked.

Today, however, our brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, (the actors of the green movement) know exactly what it is that they do not want and they also know what it is that they do want. Thus the probability for its misdirection is reduced greatly. Another difference between the uprising of three decades ago and that of today is in the roles cast by the guides, leaders and/or directors

While a huge majority of the actors of the 1979 revolt, almost blindly, followed the staging dictated by their directors; the political and/or intellectual elite, the players of the Green performance are building their play around a tangibly clear idea that already exists within their present realities. The play’s progress, however, is improvisatory, allowing for the ensemble to make up the actions as it moves forward. The actions follow a Through Line, as suggested by Stanislavsky, and each action is built upon the previous one according to David Ball’s analysis. Therefore, it is the progression of this production that pushes its directors forward forcing

them to create a unique and unprecedented mise en sce`ne. One that while adjusting to the rapidly changing scenery, costumes and tactics, it follows the plays unified objectives.

Even though we usually like to credit this or that person with the leadership of any unrest, it is generally agreed that the present Green wave in Iran is indeed a grass root movement. A rising tide, that reaches its high through the expansion of each individual particle's quest for their basic rights and freedoms. As such, this movement may indeed fit the definition of a Human Rights struggle that should concern every citizen of the world.

There is very little difference between the present desire of the Iranian people to have their votes counted accurately and that of the black Americans of half century ago to be given the right to vote. And just like Martin Luther King's non-violent walk to Washington paved the path for a black man to occupy presidency of the greatest country on earth 50 years later, the Green performance of millions of non-violent marchers throughout Iran will level the ground for the future generation to achieve justice and equality for all in one of the oldest civilizations on earth.

The current socio-political evolutionary struggle in Iran has made use of lessons learned from the past revolutions. In the past uprisings, many groups attempted to duplicate the principles of similar unrests in Iran as well as abroad.

For example, the Mujahedin Kalgh was influenced by the armed resistance movement in Algeria, and viewed itself as a continuation of the Gilan Forest Revolt of the early 20th century. Considering Iran as another Vietnam, the leaders of this group saw themselves as generals of the revolt fighting to overthrow the monarchy. Even after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, and up until today, they still continue to wear that same uniform.

Cherikhaye Fadaeiye Khalgh, as well, like their religious counterpart, followed the path of resistance mapped by the Bolshevik Revolution and the Popular Front in Uruguay. They thought by the terror of Nationalist-Bourgeois figures, they could gain sympathy and popularity among the people.

The Green movement, however, although connected to the past emotionally and concerned with the present politically, has its reality set in the future. Accordingly, while benefiting from previous theories and practices, it has developed its own unique style and model. As such, this uprising is not looking into the prior struggles within Iran or elsewhere for inspiration. Rather it seeks to implement what already exists within the Iranian constitution. Therefore any philosophical interpretation of its production, based on prior performances, is a backwards move to what has already been achieved.

Nietzsche suggests that, “all art embodies and intensifies the underlying brutalities of life to recreate the thrill of experience.” In the case of the Iranian Green theatre, it is the brutalities of life, as enforced by the Authority, that imposes itself upon the artistic expression of the search for justice. Again, while acquainted with previous theories and concepts, the Green play does not fit the model presented by any of the past genres and styles.

Peter Brook remarks that, “following Brecht, theatre needs to discover a path into the future.” The Iranian Green theatre is well on its way to making such a discovery: Audience participation is an integral part of this production where Brecht’s alienation effect is clearly visible. The Iranian teatro-political movement uses the Brechtian technique at its best. But instead of waiting for the audiences’ reaction until the curtain call, as is customary, it invites the public to take part in its progression from scene to scene, thus determining its result collaboratively.

Augusto Boal through the principles of “Theatre of the Oppressed,” promotes the engagement of the actor and the audience in political activity. In this Iranian popular theatre the audience and actors’ participation is evident in their protest against the injustice forced upon the society by its ruling government, and reactions to it. The audiences’ reaction is not unified. It does not unanimously approve of the production, rather while some may admire the performance, others might even use the traditional rotten tomato tactics. At times these reactions are so extreme that includes beating, arrest, torture, rape, imprisonment and even execution of some actors and/or audience members.

The Green uprising combines Brecht and Boal in an Artaudian manner. Artaud believes that theatre in a “passionate and convulsive conception of life” should “affect the audience as much as possible.” In his “Theatre of Cruelty he aims to hurl the spectator into the centre of the action, forcing them to engage with the performance on an instinctive level.” A performance that even though “bloody when necessary” is associated with severe moral purity, and is not afraid to pay life the price it must be paid. “The Iranian Green play has and continues to pay “life the price it must be paid.”

Brook also suggests that a future path for theatre is in its “return to Shakespeare.” Shakespeare remarks that the world is a stage and we are all players. The Iranian Green performers achieves these objectives by extending the stage to include private gatherings, inside buildings, rooftops, streets, bridges, government offices, shops, markets and every space within the country as well as those beyond its borders. The cast employs men, women and children of all cultural, social, political, religious and professional backgrounds both in and out of Iran. It is through such unprecedented cast, and upon such unmatched stage that we witness the birth of a new popular play, which may indeed offer a path toward a post-contemporary world. A production, that uses the present time as a jumping board to promote its message of change for the future. A performance that takes its actors and audience

into a global village where, although far from their present realities, they may live with impartiality and equality even with those who do not agree with its approach.

Although, according to Jerzy Grotowski all that is needed for theatre to take place is the actor and the audience, besides the presence of actor and audience, there is ample use of scenery, costumes, make up and props in the Iranian street theatre of the recent months. However, this theatre has challenged Grotowskian theory of the Holy Actor to a degree that indeed many of its actors sacrifice themselves in order to create the character. A character that is lasting and unforgettable.

Some Euro-American plays of the modern times have tried desperately to reduce the number of spoken words. This point has, probably been best served by the Iranian Green movement. The use of text in this performance is at its minimum. Unlike the wordy Brechtian plays, or poetically metaphoric plot of Theatre of the Absurd, or the rich and hard to understand psychology ingrained in Chekov and Ibsen, this play bases its production on 4 simple words. A 4 words poem, that I believe is perhaps far more eloquent than any Japanese Haiku. "Where Is My Vote," a poem that, just to draw one significant similarity, if we had in America in the year 2000, the world could have been spared the chaos, the pain and the mess we now face.

The Green production treats all its audiences and actors alike and with equal respect and candor. It allows for the expression of the ideas and opinions of each individual and/or group as long as it respects the principles of achieving freedom through non-violence means. It even tolerates the barbaric, inhumane and unjustified assault of its opposition. And it is with this forbearance that it achieves what I believe is the sign of most successful theatre where the play happens in the minds of the audience as they leave the performance.

The Iranian Green movement's aspiration is to help us realize that in this age of violence and destruction, upholding Evolutions rather than submitting to Revolutions is the only path to freedom, prosperity and justice. It, once again, reminds us of the Beatles insightful recommendation that, "You better change their minds instead."

The present Iranian **Green** stage is at once blood filled and rose covered making for an unforgettable **Red**, which along with its non-violent **White** spreads the Iranian flag throughout the country and beyond.