

TRANSFORMATION OF THE FOUND ENVIRONMENT IN PERSIAN PASSION THEATRE

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Introduction

If we consider Performance as an encounter between performers and the audience where all are contributing to establishing a relationship with one another, we may wonder what kind of relationship we encounter in the performance, and how the shape of this relationship has changed throughout performance history. With emergence of architectural theatre buildings, during the Italian Renaissance Theatre, the nature of the relationship changed and a social barrier was created in it. This research paper will seek to find some answers to the questions such as: what kind of relationship is shaped between the found audience in the found environment, and how this relationship differs from the one created between regular audiences in conventional theatre buildings. The case study for this research is Persian passion theatre, which comes from the ancient ritual in Iran that is alive and still being performed in the social found environment with found audiences.

There are too many research methods on Persian Passion Theatre from different points of view such as: mythology, religion, semiology, music, roots and history, dramaturgy, stage and set design, costum and props, etc. while this paper mentions briefly all these aspects, it will focus mostly on the cultural and social

relationship between environment and audience of traditional and ritual Persian theatre.

In open-air theatres like historical pageant productions and ancient Greek theatres, spectators had the experience of the surrounding natural features where the sky, trees or even buildings in the street were part of the setting and were sometimes used as a background for the stage. These pre-existing surroundings of the human social sites, like cities, villages, squares etc. may be described as a found environment.

Found space, which is frequently used as a setting for environmental performance, is any given space, used in its existing state for performance, most often space not originally intended for performance. Unlike most conventional theatres with a clear separation of stage and auditorium, a found environment has no preordained spectator space. (Aronson, 2018, p.9)

As Schechner described in *6 Axioms*:

The environment for theatre could be divided in two different ways. In the first case, the performance can create an environment by transforming a space while in the second case, there is given space and it could be negotiating between performance and environment. The found environment is called a negotiated environment by Schechner. This type of environment does not need to be designed and transformed for the spectators. The found environment is more fluid and leads sometimes to the performance being controlled by spectators. (Schechner, 1968)

Usually, we can meet found audiences in an environmental theatre performing in social spaces connected to our everyday life. The people in the street who have cultural and social associations with these social spaces become a found audience. These types of audiences are different from the audience in conventional theatres

where spectators buy the ticket and know where to go and sit, in both classic and modern theatre buildings.

Persian passion theatre, called Taaziyeh¹, is a type of performance that happens in the found environment and observed by the found audience. Taaziyeh is an indigenous form of Persian music theatre adopted from the religious ceremonies commemorating the suffering and tragic death of Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad. Taaziyeh is performed once a year. This traditional theatre tells the story of the battle of Karbala, in which Muhammad's grandson Hussein and his followers were killed in A.D. 680. Taaziyeh dramas are popular performances, and they are usually staged and watched in public sites.

By observing Taaziyeh as an environmental theatre which happens in social spaces we may ask what is the real essence of Taaziyeh space, and how the environment of Taaziyeh affects the relationship between the audience and the performance to compare with conventional theatre building; why the found environment is capable of making cultural and social associations with its audience, and how this relationship works, especially in Persian passion theatre. In other words, how the found environment was occupied and transformed by Taaziyeh as a traditional theatre in Iran?

Discussion

The origins of theatre go back far into the past to the religious rites of the earliest communities where the performative event happened in the outdoor found environment. And then it reached its dramatic forms in ancient Greek tragedy. The Environmental theatre had its roots in the European medieval theatre. In the early medieval time the liturgical or church drama of western Europe was born based on the birth, life and resurrection of Christ. Medieval liturgical drama developed from the Christian liturgy, particularly from the Easter celebration,

¹ Taaziyeh means comfort, condolence or expression of grief. It comes from the root Aza, which means mourning.

somehow similarly to Persian Passion theatre developing from the mourning ritual ceremony. The place for Medieval Liturgical performance at the beginning was inside a church or cathedral, and then it was gradually moved outside the church.

The twelfth-century Anglo-Norman play Adam, one of the earliest to include speeches in the vernacular, was certainly set out of doors, with the church doors forming a background through which God and chief actors came and went while devils ran about in front of the raised platform. (Hartnoll, 1978, p.40)

The huge change in the theatre environment started when theatre of the Italian Renaissance formed the new theatre building with its proscenium arch and developed painted scenery. This was when the architectural building emerged with its rigid separation between stage and auditorium and when the proscenium arch was created.

After many years centered on the proscenium arch theatre buildings, in the late 19th century, changes began to take place in European theatre. These changes happened both in terms of architecture and content. As Slovenian poet, playwright, and translator Ivo Svetina has noted

The year 1890 was undoubtedly a milestone with regard to a new understanding of the theatre, seeing it not just as a box in which performances are held evening after evening, but also as a space that has to be subordinated to the form and content of the performed theatre piece. (Svetina, 2010, p.10)

Non-theatrical spaces have been so used throughout history, particularly for folk and traditional performances. In the twentieth century, non-theatrical spaces have been more used by modern experimental theatre groups against proscenium staging. The term Environmental theatre gained during the late 1960s and 1970s, primarily due to the practice and theoretical writings of the

American theorist/director Richard Schechner. In 1960th, certain happenings or environments were created within art galleries, just as 'open space' stagings were created within a neutral theatrical space, but others were created in 'found spaces', which could add their significance to the experience.

The goal of this paper is not to analyze Environmental theatre history and space in modern experimental theatres, but to focus mostly on the social and anthropological relation of performance and its environment on the found audience. Persian Passion theatre as a traditional and ritual theatre that would happen in social spaces and observed with found audiences is the case study for this analysis.

But first, we have to ask some questions: What is a performance? A play? A concert? A circus and carnival? A celebration ceremony? A funeral? Do these events have anything to do with rituals? Performance is a mode of behavior, an approach to experience, it is a play, a sport, aesthetics, popular entertainment, experimental theatre and more. As Christopher Small mentioned 'Performance is an encounter in which human beings relate to one another. Audience and performers are contributing to its nature through the relationship they establish with one another through the performance' (Small, 1967).

This established relationship between audience and performers in natural environmental spaces is different from conventional theatre buildings with a separation between auditorium and stage.

We can consider and observe this kind of relationship where human beings relate to one another in an old traditional ritual play in Iran entitled Persian Passion theatre or Taaziye.

Historical background and origins of Persian passion theatre

In order to get to know Persian passion theatre, first we have to find out something about the origin of theatre in Iran. If we say that theatre comes from religious ceremonies and traditions, then we have to look back at religions in Iran. Iran had monotheistic (single-deity) religions unlike multi-deity religions

in India and Greece. The single-deity religions in Iran like Zoroastrian and Islam have less dramatic aspects than multi-deity religions. Religious myths in multi-deity religions create stories between God and humans or between God and another God. But in single-deity Iranian religions, creating a story with the face and physical appearance of God and saints, or stories describing their behavior, is forbidden. Still, Persian mythology with traditional tales and stories of ancient origins did exist.

Before Islam, ritual ceremonies originate from some famous mythologies and rites such as Sug-e-Siavush² based on the story from Shahnameh of Ferdowsi³. Siavush⁴ is a major figure in Ferdowsi's epic, The Shahname. There is a document that people made a ritual ceremony because of Siavush death and it could be the first Taazieh in Iran 3000 years ago. (Beyzai, 1965)

A study on Iranian Theatre, written by Bahram Beyzai⁵, is a valuable Iranian book about the origin and history of Persian passion theatre, which has not been translated into English yet. This paper brings some facts from this book.

Islam was brought to Iran via Arab-Islamic conquest in 650 AD. However, the achievements of the previous Persian civilizations were not lost, but were to a great extent absorbed by the new Islamic polity. Islam has been the official religion of Iran ever since. There are two main branches in Islam: Sunni and Shia. A split occurred shortly after the death of Muhammad over the question of who to lead the Muslims. After Islam came to Iran, the religious myth was created from the stories of the Battle of Karbala, which was the foundation

² Mourning of Siavush.

³ Ferdowsi was a Persian poet and the author of Shahnameh (Book of Kings) which is the world's longest epic poem created by a single poet.

⁴ Siavush was a legendary Iranian prince from the earliest days of the Iranian Empire. Siavush is the symbol of the innocent who had been killed by Afrasiab.

⁵ Bahram Beyzai is a critically and popularly acclaimed Iranian filmmaker, playwright, theatre director, screencritically and popularly acclaimed writer, film editor and master of Persian history and Islamic studies.



Figure 1. Painting of the archaeological image mourning for Siavus the original image *Archaeology in the U.S.S.R* book by A. L. Mongait

for Persian passion theatre and the mourning group movement or Muharram festival for Shia.

Mourning ritual in Muharram Festival

Taaziyyeh usually takes place during Muharram festival, which begins on the first day of the Muslim month of Muharram and ends on the tenth day, called Ashura. The Muharram festival, which was started after 650 AD, has improved and found new forms over time, and we can still find some types of it nowadays in Iran. There are some dramatic aspects that can be observed in these Mourning groups rituals such as: the group, harmonized, soft movements and specific rhythms; a type of group singing called Nohe in Persian, singing sadly about the injustice and cruelty suffered by the grandson of Mohammad; use of musical instruments like Senj and Dram as well as designed elements such as the symbol of the story of the Battle of Karbala.

Taaziyeh

Taaziyeh is an indigenous form of Persian music theatre adopted from the religious ceremonies. This traditional theatre tells the story of the battle of Karbala, in which Muhammad's grandson Hussein and his followers were killed by the second Umayyad caliph Yazid in A.D. 680. at Karbala, Iraq. For the Shi'a, Hussein's suffering and death became a symbol of sacrifice in the struggle between the right and wrong, justice and truth and injustice.

Taaziyeh dramas are popular performances, and they are usually staged and watched in public places. As a cultural historian and performing artist, Peter J. Chelkowski observes "Taaziyeh is a complex subject involving many disciplines, such as religion, history, literature, anthropology, psychology, sociology, music, and the fine arts, as well as drama and theatre" (Chelkowski, 1979, p.255).

Participants and spectators do not view Taaziyeh as theatre, but rather as part of ritual mourning. Nevertheless, Taaziyeh has many theatrical conventions. The players do not memorize their roles, rather, they read them from strips of paper held in their hands called Tumar. The 'good' characters, on the side of Imam Hussein, chant their lines in classical Persian musical modes and wear the colour green. The 'bad' characters declaim their lines in stentorian tones and wear the colour red. Women's roles are taken by men who wear black and veil their faces. The performances offer a number of roles for children, played by young boys. The red colour symbolises death.

The design and setting in Taaziyeh utilize a special technique. This unique technique may not be accepted by western theatres or theatre designers, but Taaziyeh spectators accept the convention easily. They know the story and they use the symbolic elements in Taaziyeh to imagine the whole story in their mind. Taaziyeh spectators are not surprised when they see two actors holding a door to show the door of Imam's house, or when they see a chair in two separate scenes

representing a throne in the court of Yazid⁶, or when a bowl of water represents a river. Props, except the real ones such as swords, are all symbolic in this play. To name a few more symbolic theatrical rules, the performers turn around the platforms once or twice to show the distance between two locations and passing of the time, and in order to determine the places as different cities in the performance, they announce the name of the location after turning around the platform. The musical intervals also show the passage of time.

The only conventional building built for Taaziyeh was Takiyeh Dowlat in Tehran in the Royal compound. Takiyeyeh Dowlat was built by the order of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar in 1870. This building was inspired by Europe's opera houses, but it was destroyed in 1947. As Chelkowski observed, eventually, Takiyeh Dowlat's walls, canvas ceiling and circular stage were copied in Takiyehs all over the country. After this building had been destroyed, social spaces for Takiyehs were built by society members, and these are the spaces for Taaziyeh and Muharram festival.

The environment and space in Taaziyeh

Like Western passion plays, Taaziyeh dramas were originally performed outdoors, at crossroads and other public where large audiences could gather. Performances later took place in the courtyards of inns and private homes, but eventually unique structures called Takiyeh or Husseinyeh were constructed by individual towns for the staging of the plays. (Chelkowski, 2005, p.17)

In Taaziyeh, the main characters who articulate and transform the space into the stage for Taaziyeh are ordinary citizens of that district. Citizens of a particular town or village give contributions and work together to build and decorate the space for Takiyeh. These temporary places are built in each town district with the

⁶ Yazid was the second caliph of the Umayyad caliphate. His caliphate was marked by the death of Husayn ibn Ali.



Figure 2. Kemal al-mulk painting of Takiyeh Dowlat

support of locals during the Muharram festival. People cooperate both socially and culturally, and women even prepare food and refreshments and serve them to the spectators.

Briefly, we can say that Taaziyeh performs in a found environment that could be a spontaneously made circle in the street or a street corner, and all these places exist and have their own identities before they are used as stages. The audience area in Taaziyeh is a small or huge circle around the performers. There is no predesigned set up for this theatre, and the found audience are the people passing by who create a circle around it. As Shechner stated in six Axioms, the negotiated environment is a more fluid situation that makes dialogue and shifting dynamic among performers and spectators, which we can observe in Taaziyeh as well.

The use of open-air theatre changes the system of illusion and technique on the stage. In Taaziyeh, there is no technological setting and even no light setting.



Figure 3. Ta'ziyeh ritual in Iran – A UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage

Usually, the natural, outside light is used, and the performers use minimal, symbolic costumes and props to represent the characters and what they do.

Taaziye for Iranian audience is part of a ritual mourning where its audience stands in a circle exchanging dynamic energy with the performance. Although they all know the end of the story, the non-illusionistic convention of Taaziye ends with a moment of sadness that causes the audience to sob.

Nowadays, we can still see this Ritual Environmental Theatre in social spaces in many cities in Iran. In contrast to the richness of Takiyeh's decorations, Taaziye stage design is rather minimal and symbolic. All Takiyehs, regardless of their size, are constructed as rounded theatres to intensify the dynamics between actors and audience. "The spectators are literally surrounded by the action and often become physical participants in the play, in unwallled Takiyeh. It is not unusual for combat scenes to occur behind the audience" (Chelkowski, 2005, p.17).

Peter Brook, who got inspired by Taaziye, mentioned:

Taaziyeh is one of the strongest things I have ever seen. A group of 400 villagers, the entire population of the place, sitting under the tree and passing from roars of laughter to outright sobbing—although they knew perfectly well the end of the story—as they saw Hussein in danger of being killed, and then fooling his enemies, and then being martyred. And when he was martyred, the theatre form became truth. (Chelkowski, 1979, p.255)

Conclusion

To take part in ritual performative events is to explore and celebrate the concept of how we relate to ourselves, to one another and to the world. The environment has a crucial role in making this social and physical relationship between a performance and audience. Before the introduction of the rigid separation between auditorium and stage, and the imposed social barrier in the classic theatre buildings, the natural outside environment was the space for celebrating these ritual events. By emergence and development of architectural theatre buildings, this relationship was changed and shaped by creation of a physical distance and social barrier between performance and audience.

When we look through the history of environmental theatre, we can see that different types of environmental theatre operated in parallel with the narrative western theatre. This paper, however, instead of focusing on contemporary environmental theatre, focused on and researched only one ritual traditional environmental theatre which has been performed for more than 1000 years in order to emphasize the relationship between ritual, environment and found audiences.

In Taaziyeh, spectators explore the environment of performance as a social space. This found environment is part of their social environment. It could be in the street, in the street corner or in front of a mosque. Actually, the space of performance in Taaziyeh is defined originally by the action of performers and spectators. This natural environment is the very place where the social and cultural relationship between audience and performance is shaped.

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