Time Out of Memory

Ta’ziyeh, the Total Drama

Peter J. Chelkowski

The dramatic form known as the passion play is often associated exclusively with Western, and specifically, Christian theatrical tradition. However, one of the most highly developed and powerful examples of this genre is, in fact, the ta’ziyeh—the passion play of the Shiite Muslims performed in Iran, and recently adapted in South Lebanon—which recounts the tragedy of Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. It is the only serious drama ever developed in the Islamic world, except for contemporary theatre, which was introduced into Islamic countries along with other Western influences in the mid-19th century. In an extraordinary development, the Lincoln Center Summer Festival 2002 included three ta’ziyehs, performed in July by Iran’s foremost actors. The production was staged for only the third time in a Western country, after receiving critical acclaim and playing to packed houses in Avignon and Paris in France, and in Parma, Italy. It was later staged again in Italy in July 2003 in an innovative, interactive format that mixed videos of a ta’ziyeh audience in Iran with a live performance in an abandoned factory in Rome. The famous film director, Abbas Kiarostami, arranged this spectacle.

The tragedy reenacts the death of Hussein and his male children and companions in a brutal massacre on the plain of Karbala (about 60 miles south/southwest of modern day Baghdad), in the year 680 C.E., year 61 of the Muslim calendar. Hussein’s murder was the outcome of a protracted power struggle for control of the nascent Muslim community following the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Two factions arose with competing views on the process for determining the new head of the community, or caliph. The Sunnites believed that the caliph should be elected according to ancient Arabian tribal tradition, while the Shiites advocated for the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad—through his daughter Fatemeh Zahra—called Imams, who they claimed possessed a divine right to authority in both spiritual and temporal matters. Hussein became the head of the Shiites after religio-political opponents assassinated his father and elder brother. His refusal to swear allegiance to Yazid, the Sunnite caliph in Damascus, made it necessary for Hussein to leave Medina and seek refuge in Mecca. Eventually with his family and a group of supporters, he set out for Kufa, a city in southern Iraq where he had numerous partisans.

On the journey to Kufa, Hussein and his party were ambushed by Yazid’s troops and forced to swear an oath of allegiance to the Sunnite leader as the price of their freedom. Tradition has it that this took place on the first day of the month of
Muharram. For ten days, Hussein’s company was cut off from water in the scorching desert of Karbala and subjected to physical and psychological pressure. Despite the knowledge that his supporters in Kufa had abandoned him after being terrorized by Yazid’s army, Hussein refused to take the oath. On the 10th day, known as Ashura, after an intense battle, all the male members but Hussein’s 22-year-old son, Zain’l Abedin, who was ill and being nursed by the women in their tents, were savagely killed. Their heads were cut off and taken as trophies to Yazid in Damascus, while the female members of the party were taken hostage. The battle at Karbala and its aftermath precipitated the definitive schism of the Sunnite and Shiite Islamic branches.

The slaughter at Karbala came to be considered by the Shiites as the ultimate example of sacrifice, the pinnacle of human suffering. The month of Muharram became the month of mourning, when Shiites all over the world commemorate Hussein’s sacrifice in stationary and ambulatory rituals of unequaled intensity. It was from these ritual observances that ta’ziyeh, which literally means “to mourn” or “to console,” arose as a dramatic form. Once Shiite Islam was officially recognized as Iran’s state religion in the early 16th century, royal patronage ensured that the Muharram festival observances would assume a central position in the cultural and religious identity of the country, and the festival became a unifying force for the nation.

If the success of a drama is to be measured by the effect which it produces upon the people for whom it is composed, or upon the audience before whom it is represented, no play has ever surpassed the tragedy known in the Mussulman world as that of Hasan and Husain. (Pelley 1879 [I]:III)
Like Western passion plays, ta’ziyeh dramas were originally performed outdoors at crossroads and other public places where large audiences could gather. Performances later took place in the courtyards of inns and private homes, but eventually unique structures called takiyeh or husseiniyeh were constructed by individual towns for the staging of the plays. Community cooperation was encouraged in the building and decoration of the takiyeh whether the funds for the enterprise were provided by a wealthy, public-minded benefactor or by contributions from the citizens of a particular town or district. The takiyeh varied in seating capacity from intimate structures able to accommodate a few dozen people to large buildings capable of holding 1,000 spectators or more. Often the takiyeh were temporary, erected especially for the observance of the Muharram festival. During the festival period, the takiyeh were lavishly decorated with the prized personal possessions of the local community, such as rare and costly imported goods like mirrors and chandeliers. Refreshments were prepared by women and served to the spectators by the children of well-to-do families. Takiyeh Dawlat, the Royal Theatre in Tehran, was the most famous of all the ta’ziyeh performance spaces. Built in the 1870s by Naser al-Din Shah, the Royal Theatre’s sumptuous magnificence surpassed that of Europe’s greatest opera houses in the opinion of many Western visitors.

In contrast to the richness of the takiyeh’s decorations, ta’ziyeh stage décor and props are quite stark. All takiyeh, regardless of their size, are constructed as theatres-in-the-round to intensify the dynamic between actors and audience: the spectators are literally surrounded by the action and often become physical participants in the play; in unwalled takiyeh, it is not unusual for combat scenes to occur behind the audience.

The main drama occurs on a raised, curtainless platform in the center of a building or courtyard. Subplots and battles take place in a sand-covered ring around the stage. Actors frequently jump off the stage into this space to mark the passage of time or a journey, and scene changes are indicated when a performer circles the platform. If there are auxiliary stages that extend into the audience, they serve as settings for scenes of special significance. Corridors running from the stage through the seating area serve as passageways for troops, messengers, and animals. The starkness of the stage represents the barrenness of the desert plain at Karbala. Props are few and largely symbolic: the Euphrates River is denoted by a basin of water; a tree branch indicates a grove of palms. More utilitarian props such as chairs or bedding and cooking utensils are carried onstage by the actors or even by members of the audience.

Costumes are also meant to be representational. Although fabulously elegant stage attire was common at the Royal Theatre during the reign of Nasser al-Din Shah (1848–1896), there was no attempt to make the actors’ garments historically accurate. The main goal of costume design was to help the spectators identify a character and his nature by his clothing. This practice has continued over time with certain characters adopting the prevailing fashions of the day for their particular roles. Thus, an actor in Nasser al-Din Shah’s era playing a Western ambassador wore a frock coat—the standard diplomatic outfit of the 19th century; after World War II, the same ambassador may be depicted wearing a British military uniform. Performers in women’s parts wear baggy black garments that cover them from head to toe. Since female roles are played by men, the voluminous robes and veils also provide concealment. Additional clues to a character’s identity can be discerned through various accessories: sometimes a learned man wears reading glasses, while a villain appears in sunglasses (reflecting perhaps the worldwide influence of American gangster films). Color symbolism further helps the audience to recognize different dramatic personalities and situations. When a white cloth is put on a protagonist’s shoulders or he dons a white shirt, it is understood that the white symbolizes a shroud and he will soon sacrifice his life and be killed.
Ta’ziyeh in France
The Ritual of Renewal at the Festival d’Automne

Alain Crombecque

The first time that I heard of ta’ziyeh was at the end of the 1960s in Nancy, France. Jack Lang and Christian Dupavillon wanted to include a ta’ziyeh production at the World Theatre Festival. The production did not take place; I don’t know why. I knew the origin of the ta’ziyeh ritual and all the logistical complications that made it difficult to mount a production (the circular stage; the horses, etc.). I had also been many times to the Festival of Shiraz, and, while I had not had the chance to see an actual production of ta’ziyeh, I had heard the enthusiastic reviews of those who had. The idea of staging a ta’ziyeh continued to appeal to me. My meetings with Soudebeh Kia and Farrokh Gaffary led me to develop a large-scale program in the early 1990s for the Festival of Avignon, which I had directed since 1985.

France was the first non-Muslim country in which ta’ziyeh was performed. In 1990, in the middle of the Gulf War, my colleagues and I had undertaken a mission to Iran in the company of the press. We decided to devote the 1991 Festival of Avignon to Persian traditions. The productions and concerts would take place in the open air in a way that recalled the caravansaries that I had seen in Iran. It was a very bold move on behalf of the French authorities to invite a ta’ziyeh troupe to France only 12 years after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Apart from political implications there were also social and dramatic connotations for these performances: How could the Shiite passion play be performed for a non-Muslim, non-Shiite audience in the city of Popes? In the end, more than 100 Iranian artists participated, and their performance did not pose either a diplomatic or political problem. My wish to see the bards of Khorasan, the musicians of Louristan and Balouchistan, the dervishes of Kurdistan, the zurkhaneh (the traditional Iranian sports club, lit., house of force or strength)—and also Shahram Nazeri’s extraordinary concert in the Court of Honor of the Papal Palace—was fulfilled.

But the real surprise—the biggest surprise that summer—occurred in the beautiful cloister of the Celestines, between two chestnut trees more than 100 years old. The five performances of ta’ziyeh stunned audiences through the force of the play’s narratives and the vocal abilities of the actors. Though ignorant of the symbolism and profound significance of what was taking place onstage, the spectators nevertheless understood the tragic dimensions of what they were watching. Something in the ta’ziyeh stirred the collective memory of the audience and reminded it of the Passion of Christ. The ta’ziyeh was a great success in Avignon and the performers were able to build bridges with the audience. The French press wrote rave reviews.

The ta’ziyeh in Avignon (with Hassan Fayaz) was a trial-run, a sort of introduction to the large-scale production which we had the chance to welcome to Paris nine years later for the Festival d’Automne. There, thanks to the administration of the Grand Hall of la Villette, we were able to erect a circus tent with 800 seats which allowed us to present the ta’ziyeh in all its fullness. The tradition of a circular stage was maintained as was the placement of the audience. Since many takiyehs and husseiniyehs in Iran are courtyard with awnings, this was an attempt to re-create as closely as possible the Iranian ta’ziyeh environment. The rest was in the hands of the performers. The ta’ziyeh proved that its theatricality and drama could overcome religious, linguistic, and cultural differences.

Prior to the ta’ziyeh performance in Paris, my colleagues and I had returned to Iran and seen a number

An even more obvious indication of a character’s disposition is found in the way that he delivers his lines. In the ta’ziyeh, protagonist sing their parts and antagonists recite theirs. Dressed in red to symbolize blood and oppression, the villains often purposely overact by shrieking their lines in harsh unpleasant voices. By contrast, the heroes sing their parts in the classical Persian modes and clothe themselves in the green color of the garden paradise. Traditionally, actors were chosen for their physical attributes. Protagonists playing Hussein for example, were expected to be tall with broad shoulders and fine beards. This could and did
cause casting problems, however, since a fine singing voice was necessary to complement the pleasing physique of a hero. Young boys with good vocal skills who began by playing girl’s roles in the ta’ziyeh often assumed the parts of young men after their voices changed. If a young actor did not attain the stature deemed compatible with a heroic part or if his voice retained a feminine quality, he would continue to play female characters.

Singers are accompanied by a variety of drums, trumpets, flutes, and cymbals. An orchestra can be quite substantial or consist of just a few musicians, depend-

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Alain Crombecque has been active in cultural and theatrical programs in France and abroad since the mid-1960s. He has been the Director of the Festival d’Automne à Paris since 1993, and from 1974 to 1978 was the festival’s artistic director. From 1985 to 1992, he was the Director of the Festival d’Avignon.
ing upon the financial resources or theatrical experience of the troupe. Drum music announces that the troupe has arrived and the drama is about to begin. It may be repeated several times, particularly if the audience needs more time to assemble. Once the spectators have gathered, a fanfare is played while the actors file into the performance area in procession. This is followed by a short overture to set the mood for the play about to be performed. The drama opens with the pish-khani, or prologue, which is sung by the chorus and presents a summary of the plot. During the pish-khani, everybody sings, including the antagonists. Usually the chorus gathers in the main performance space, but it occasionally divides into two groups on either side of this area and sings alternate lines in antiphony (call and response). Throughout the play, programmatic instrumental music alternates

2. In the 1870s, the Takiyeh Dowlat was erected in Tehran in the Royal Compound. Its walls, canvas ceiling, and circular stage were copied in takiyehs and husseiniyehs all over the country. Tehran, 1976. (After Kemal al-Mulk’s paintings; photo by Peter J. Chelkowski)
with singing. These musical intervals set a mood or advance the action by indicating the passage of time. They also serve to cue a singer by establishing the particular *dastgah*, or mode, in which he is about to perform. He will then sing the scene *a capella*.

According to many Western and Iranian scholars of music, it is thanks to the *ta'ziyeh* that much of the classical Persian repertoire has survived (see Massoudieh 1367; Khaleqi n.d.). But just as Western influences are evident in *ta'ziyeh* costumes, they are also prominent in the musical elements of the drama. During the zenith of the *ta'ziyeh* in the latter part of the 19th century, the first Polytechnic College, Darul-funun, was founded in Iran and staffed by foreign instructors. The curriculum consisted largely of military subjects, including band music. Eventually, quite a number of these military marches found their way into the repertory of the *takiyeh* theatres.

It is the responsibility of the *ta'ziyeh* director (called in the past *muinulbuka*, the “conjurer of tears,” now called *ta'ziyeh gerdan*) to supervise the music and assemble an orchestra. In addition, he acts as the producer, stage manager, prompter, PR man, and financial director. He is truly a “Renaissance man” of the theatre, supervising not only the drama itself, but also making the necessary arrangements with the local authorities and accounting for the financial returns. Always onstage during a performance, dressed in black, the director makes sure that the production runs smoothly and oversees the interaction of actors, musicians, and audience. His ubiquitous presence is not distracting to the spectators as he is seen as an integral part of the *ta'ziyeh* drama. In his role as prompter, he cues actors and helps children and inexperienced players with their lines.

In the past, actors read their lines from crib sheets held in their palms, indicating that they were merely role-carriers with no personal connections to the characters they portrayed. Today most performers learn their roles by heart (if they don’t, they refrain from conspicuously referring to their notes). While tradition—
ally the director was responsible for eliciting strong emotions of grief and sadness from the audience by the manner in which the production was staged, it is today more incumbent on the actors to provide a cathartic experience for the spectators. Influenced heavily by the realistic acting of modern film and television, tāʿziyeh actors no longer distance themselves from the characters they are playing, but throw themselves wholeheartedly into their roles. Often the performers identify so strongly with their parts that they are swept away by their situations. In turn, the audience is caught up in an atmosphere of potent and sincere emotions.

The plays devoted to the tragedy at Karbala and its surrounding events form the core of the tāʿziyeh repertory. Although the massacre of Hussein and his followers historically took place in one day on the 10th of Muharram, the battle is divided into many different episodes performed on separate days. The only fixed day and play in the Muharram repertory is the martyrdom of Hussein on the 10th, or Ashura; others can be performed in varying sequence. Usually, the cycle
begins on the first day of Muharram with a play commemorating the death of Hussein’s emissary to Kufa (near Karbala), Muslim bin Akil. This is followed by a daily progression of plays, each devoted to the martyrdom of various members of Hussein’s family or his companions. In these dramas, a hero takes on the entire enemy force unassisted while the remaining protagonists gather on the central stage to reflect on their fate and deliver comments of philosophical and religious nature. Each play contributes to the gradually increasing emotional buildup anticipating the supreme sacrifice of Hussein, the “Prince of Martyrs.” Hussein’s death does not always conclude the essential ta’ziyeh repertory. Performances may continue after Ashura to depict the sorrowful destiny of the female members of Hussein’s family who were taken as captives to Damascus.

New plays that depicted the sacrifices of Shiite martyrs before and after Karbala were added to the ta’ziyeh fold over time. Based on the Qur'an, hadith (stories about the life, deeds, and actions of the Prophet), legends, and current events, these productions provided an excuse to extend ta’ziyeh dramas throughout the year. Even these non-Muharram plays, however, retain a connection to the tragedy at Karbala through a dramatic device known as guriz, or digression. Within a particular play, the guriz may be a direct verbal reference to Hussein’s martyrdom or a brief scene depicting an aspect of his tragedy, or both. Through the guriz, all ta’ziyeh drama expands beyond spatial and time constraints to merge the past and present into one unifying moment of intensity that allows the spectators to be simultaneously in the performance space and at Karbala.

The number of ta’ziyeh works is vast with new productions and local variations of established dramas constantly being added to the canon. The Cerulli collection at the Vatican Library contains over 1,053 ta’ziyeh manuscripts. It is important to note that ta’ziyeh scripts are rarely intended for reading, but solely for performing. Each part is written out on loose narrow sheets of paper, which the
actor can hold in the palm of his hand. The theatrical context of the script, in conjunction with setting, costumes, action, and musical and verbal elements, provides a standard for judging its value.

There is an amateur Muharram ta’ziyeh tradition that exists alongside the tradition of the professional ta’ziyeh dramatic companies. Typically, a production of this kind is organized by a former professional ta’ziyeh actor who brings together the residents of a district to perform for purely religious reasons. The dramatization of the death of Hussein gives the participants an opportunity to exhibit their own sorrows and desires as an expression of their faith within an archetypal setting. Professional ta’ziyeh productions today are usually commercial enterprises—fundamental social and political changes in Iran during the 20th century abolished the practice of artistic patronage on the individual and communal level that had flourished in the past. In the 1930s, restrictions imposed by the government forced ta’ziyeh performances to move from towns to rural areas. At present, professional
troupes are often family-run businesses that move from place to place every two weeks performing a different play every day and occasionally giving performances both in the afternoon and evening.

In the last 50 years or so, Europeans and Americans have traveled to Asia to experience the bond between actor and audience that is one of the hallmarks of the Eastern dramatic tradition. The most common destinations were India and the Far East, but in the late 1960s, Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski discovered ta’ziyeh. Brook in particular was profoundly impacted by the dramatic possibilities of the Persian form. He explained:

I saw in a remote Iranian village one of the strongest things I have ever seen in theatre: 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. (1979:52)

Brook proved that Iranian dramatic conventions and cultural themes could be effectively transposed to the Western stage with his successful adaptation in 1979 of a 12th-century mystical tract, The Conference of the Birds, into a theatrical play. Jerzy Grotowski also borrowed from the ta'ziyeh tradition to fuse dramatic action with ritual as a means of uniting actor and audience. However, his productions with the Laboratory Theatre carefully controlled the dynamic between the players and the spectators by imposing limits on space, audience size, and seating placement. Ta'ziyeh, in contrast, actively retains a fundamental principle of intimacy without placing any constraints on the size of the performance space or the number of spectators. This is le theatre total. In the words of Samuel Benjamin, the first American envoy to Iran, “Ta'ziyeh is an interesting exhibition of the dramatic genius of the Persian race” (Benjamin 1887:382).

Notes
1. Lewis Pelley’s The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain (1879) contains translations of 37 ta'ziyeh plays into a beautifully ornate Victorian English.
2. Ed. note: See the article in this issue by Stephen Blum, “Compelling Reasons to Sing The Music of Ta'ziyeh.”

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