

Stages of Performing in Pahlavi Iran (1925-1979)

An interdisciplinary workshop curated and organised by

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Venue Käte Hamburger Research Centre global dis:connect,
Maria-Theresia-Str. 21, 81675 Munich

About the workshop

With the introduction of European drama in the mid-19th century, a new model of theatre emerged in Iran. Initially an instrument of civic education and enlightenment, the theatre developed during the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911) into an instrument of political education, agitation and propaganda, though the entertaining aspect remained paramount. During the early Pahlavi period (1925-1941) – the era of nation-building and forced modernisation – the 'new' theatre also had a formative function as an instrument of social change both in its form of modern bourgeois entertainment and in its function as a didactic means of ideological education and state propaganda. Like other forms of popular expression, art and media, the dramatic arts were under the strict control of state censors. Nevertheless, during the late Pahlavi period under Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979), Iranian theatre developed from a previously amateur activity into an established cultural institution of modern society.

In contrast to the processes of social change in Pahlavi Iran, the cultural-historical relevance of the performing arts has not yet been fully researched. In Western theatre studies, Iranian theatre exists only in a dim niche of exoticism, and existing publications on world theatre history lack comprehensive contributions. Although the number of publications in European languages has increased, the subject of Iranian theatre and dramatic arts is still underrepresented in the field of Iranian studies. In Iranian theatre studies, Persian publications on 20th-century theatre have propagated over the last decade, although comprehensive studies that develop their own theories and methodologies lack.

The reasons for these oversights are complex. For example, Iranian drama, while still young as a new literary model, has not yet been included in the canon of Persian literature as a genre of its own, equivalent to European drama.

From the perspective of theatre historiography – Western or Iranian – the 'new' Iranian theatre has long been subject to cultural chauvinism. This tendency to marginalise new theatre forms in non-European cultures has also persisted for many decades in the self-perception of Iranian theatre historiography. In Iranian history, however, the engagement with and adaptation of foreign theatrical models is not to be understood as cultural subjugation, but rather as a productive expansion of indigenous theatricality and a means of adapting to changing social realities.

Recent years have brought a greater appreciation of the theatre of the early 20th century, for the 'new' theatre was not a mere cultural import from Europe for long; rather, at the turn of the century, playwrights transformed European components into something 'Iranian'. The question of when this model of adaptation will be recognised as a new, distinct form of Iranian theatricality remains open.

To discuss holistically, this workshop focuses on different forms of stage art, e.g. dance, drama and musical theatre as well as festivals (e.g. the Shiraz Festival in 1967). The neglect or separate consideration of the musicological aspects of the performing arts reinforce the importance of these forms.

In the context of global theatre histories, understood as historiography of connections, interweavings, exchange and dis:connections, our workshop seeks proposals on the following sub-topics:

- Transnational influences on the performing arts in Pahlavi Iran and transregional exchanges of stages in terms of questions of local and/or regional theatre histories in an overarching, interrelated perspective.
- The impact of other countries and regions of the Persianate world on the notion of 'development' of Iranian theatre during the Pahlavi period (theatre of Afghanistan, Tajikistan and the Caucasian republics etc.),
- Performing Arts and political propaganda
- 'Detraditionalisation' ./ 'Persianisation'
- Theatre practice and practices of performing power between cultural nationalism and opposition (drama, censorship, symbolism etc.)
- Theory and terminology arising from the different conventions and/or connotations in Persian and European languages. The increasing literarisation of drama in the second half of the 20th century also raises the question of drama as a literary genre in the history of Persian literature.

With our discussion we also seek to exchange on the increasing methodological obstacles to fieldwork and archival work in the region.

Submission of proposals by 15 December 2023. Proposals should include a short CV, a provisional title and an abstract of no more than 300 words. Please send these documents in one PDF file to Nic Leonhardt and Anna Heller (contact info below).

Accommodation will be provided for the duration of the workshop, and we can help with travel costs where required.

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