

Choreographing "Persia" Representation and Orientalisation in Staging and choreographing Iranian Dance
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For the vast majority of both Iranians and, especially, non-Iranians the first, and often only, experience of Iranian traditional dance they have is that of staged or choreographed performances rather than actual performances in village or tribal celebrations in which dance constitutes a part of life not a staged performance. For over seventy-five years, Iranians and non-Iranians have arranged, choreographed, and staged performances of Iranian traditional folk and urban (sometimes called "classical") dance traditions for purposes of viewing in public performances both inside and outside of Iran.

When I refer to these choreographies and stagings, I mean the use of western staging methods and techniques that came to supplant indigenous theatrical performances by professional motreb troupes that were beginning to decline in both quantity and quality after the end of the Qajar dynasty in 1925. Under the aegis of the Pahlavi dynasty, members of the Iranian elite began to embrace western art forms, and the government began to subsidize music, and later dance and theater. The appearance of Madame Cornelli's classes in western classical ballet in 1928 marked the first known appearance of western dance forms in Iran and many hundreds of children passed through her classes, including Hayedeh Changizian who was to become Iran's most famous dancer.

Those individuals responsible for creating performances of traditional dance also, consciously or unconsciously, created representations of Iran, Iranian cultural expression, and by extension, the Iranian people. Unfortunately, many of the viewers consider these staged representations as accurate duplications of the dancing that occurs in villages and tribal areas. But, as I will argue, literal transferences of performances in the original contexts of village and tribal celebrations to proscenium arch stages and other public performance venues, are not possible.

Because Iran is a vast country and travel difficult, especially in the past, many Iranians, particularly those living in large cities, have never had the opportunity to see traditional folk dances that form an important aspect of many of the celebrations, such as weddings, held throughout villages and tribal areas in Iran. In addition, under the former regime, non-Iranians had to have special travel documents that frequently took days and weeks to procure through government bureaucracies that helped to discourage widespread dance research. 2 (Hamada 1977, 1978) As a non-Iranian, I was fortunate to see performances of regional folk dances such as those of Gilan and Khorasan that were held in Tehran in special exhibitions.

Any discussion of what constitutes choreography and the presentation of traditional or folk dance in public presentations inevitably opens what I call the "Great Pandora's Box of Authenticity." The problem of how to engage the issue of "authenticity" in the presentation of traditional and folk dance for the proscenium arch stage and other public performing venues continues to preoccupy the scholar, the choreographer, and the lay person alike.

No performance placed on the stage, even those of actual native dancers, can be considered as an exact replica of a village or tribal performance in its native context. Those who stage or choreograph performances, even natives, make choices for the stage that differ from what occurs in the field. Typical of some of these basic choices: avoidance of excessive repetition in the dances and music, the omission of children and old people, leaving out poor

performers, barnyard smells and the dust from the dance area are generally absent, uniformity of clothing, reconfiguring the dance formations to face the audience, and rehearsing to achieve a high level of performance.

Several individuals have presented papers on various aspects of this topic in recent seminars that I have attended and the recent Proceedings of the 21st Symposium of the International Council for Traditional Music Study Group on Ethnochoreology (1992. Korčula, Croatia) contained several essays addressing the topic. The discourse that swirls about authenticity in staged performances of traditional dance is oversaturated with covert and overt accusations and guilt feelings surrounding issues of appropriation, colonialism, preservation, revitalization, and, of course, how authentic a specific presentation is.

I have often witnessed panels of choreographers and artistic directors of dance companies of all genres, charged with dispensing public funding on federal, state, and local levels, regularly bring this topic up during panel meetings when reviewing the work of traditional dance companies and their choreographers. ³ The serious consequences for those who have failed the "authenticity test" can be grave indeed: funding may not be forthcoming for those who have failed the litmus test of authenticity, a quality that has shifted over time.

The topics of staging traditional dance and authenticity are so fraught with heavy emotions that, until recently, many serious dance scholars, who bear the label of ethnochoreologists, have eschewed the subject of staged dance in favor of recording and describing the "pure" folk and tribal dances found in remote areas of the world, or classical dances of Asia, as the only (sainted) and legitimate areas of research in traditional dance. They have become what dance historian Theresa Buckland terms "Keepers of the Truth" (1999, 196) and they have considered performances of both professional and amateur folk and traditional dance companies that thrive in many areas of the world as too "slick, theatricalized, and glitzy" to merit serious scholarly attention. A frequent reaction on the part of many scholars can be found in the following statement:

The treasures carefully handed over to us by previous generations must be treated not only with respect but with theoretical restlessness and questioning. The responsibility of moulding a public is immense, especially when the object is traditional culture, which is not the product of an individual but of an ethnic collectivity. Demand for high quality performances of traditional dance increases year by year, and we must safeguard traditional culture from becoming a theatrical object expressing the artistic priorities of individuals. (Rombos-Levides 1992, 104)

Dance ethnographers Georgiana Gore and Maria Koutsouba add: "Any representation of traditional dance outside its customary context is no more than 'imitation' and may be seen as an artificial and adulterated version of the 'original'" (1992, 30).

As a result of such attitudes it should come as no surprise that the International Encyclopedia of Dance (Oxford University Press, 1998), the major scholarly resource for dance research, contains few articles, and scant mention devoted to the directors, choreographers, and performances of the many of major state folk dance ensembles that have dominated the stages of the world over the past fifty years. Several individuals, such as Zvonimir Ljevaković, the founding artistic director of Lado, the Croatian State Ensemble of Folk Songs and Dances, and Olga Skovran, the founding artistic director of the Serbian State Folk Ensemble of Serbia, Kolo, did not merit mention, while less known colleagues in modern dance or classical ballet have received full articles since the latter genres are considered by many dance historians, and the general public, to constitute "high art." Too staged on the one hand, and not "real art," like classical ballet and modern dance on the

other, dance scholars have largely ignored the topic of staged folk dance, the groups who perform them and the choreographers who create them.

Throughout the world, and especially in immigrant and ethnic communities in North America, dance constitutes a major symbol of ethnic identity. Because dance is embodied and immediate in its presence, it raises many highly emotional political questions of how a specific ethnic community is to be represented and who has the right to determine that representation. Unlike many areas of the world, in North America the presence of many individuals, like me, who are not of the ethnicity of the dances they perform and create on the stage, but come from the Anglo-dominated mainstream society, further complicates these issues of representation and authenticity.

I have already observed my fiftieth year as an active choreographer of traditional dance. As one of the pioneers in the field, I have discussed how a choreographer of traditional dance can successfully transfer dancing from "the field" to the stage, what constitutes "authenticity," and what makes a successful folk choreography. Thus, over the past decades, I have provided advice and taken philosophical stances, and portentously "pronounced" my opinions on a wide variety of scholarly panels and seminars and arts council panels. (See for example Shay 1986). Needless to say, those opinions and "pearls of wisdom" have changed through the years as I matured as an artist, and as modes of choreographic representation have altered and mutated through time.

For the latest change of modes, I will later in the essay analyze the changes in the choreographic output of the Iranian born choreographer, Jamal, the artistic director of the AVAZ International Dance Theatre. His choreographic creations over the past fifteen years are representative of new trends in choreography based on traditional materials that have begun to surface over the past ten to fifteen years in many dance companies, especially in ethnic and immigrant communities where a new generation of choreographers and dance directors is fashioning new ways of choreographing and staging to fit in their new environment and new audiences.

As I have argued in the past, the power to represent others is not only theoretical power in the sense famously analyzed and theorized by philosopher Michel Foucault (1977, 1980), but it is actual power, particularly when the individual is creating on behalf of the state, such as the representations of various ethnic groups found in the repertoires of state folk dance ensembles like the former Iranian National Folk Organization, known in the West as the Mahalli Dancers, and other state sponsored folk dance ensembles throughout the world. (Shay 2002) Thus, these performances can become contested sites of representation.

These staged and choreographed performances of Iranian dance vary widely in respect to the degree of authentic elements incorporated in the performances. These elements include, among other ingredients, dance steps and movements, musical accompaniment, costumes and clothing, and context in the form of sets, props, lighting and other elements of western stagecraft. In Iran, the range of dance performances that the viewer most frequently encountered, and can still encounter, includes performances by peasant and tribal performers, both during the former and current regimes, in which the performers are brought to Tehran and other locations, often with the stated purpose to introduce urban audiences to the customs and artistic traditions of these groups, a familiar tactic in multicultural states attempting to foster national identities through ethnic diversity. At the other end of the spectrum are professional and amateur performances of elaborately choreographed versions of traditional regional folk dances and highly complex versions of solo improvised dancing, often including highly orientalist elements and images. These performances have been produced both in Iran and throughout other parts of the world as

well, especially where large Iranian populations live, such as in Southern California and Europe.

Therefore, in order for the reader to have a full picture of the way in which Iranian traditional dance is most frequently seen and experienced, I will describe and analyze the ways in which both Iranians and non-Iranians have presented dance performances, and through these performances, offer their audiences a representation—an image—of Iran. It is important for the reader to grasp that this essay does not in any way constitute dance criticism. In other words, I am not attempting to determine the quality of specific performances or specific dance companies, but rather to describe and analyze the elements and the intents of the choreographers, particularly as they have articulated those intentions in program notes and media interviews, and the way in which they have chosen to represent Iran, frequently named "Persia," because of its romantic, orientalist connotations, for their audiences. This is not to say that I, like other viewers, have no opinion about the quality of these works, but that these can only be personal opinions and evaluations, no matter how educated the viewer. Just as in music, in dance there exists a canon of works by outstanding choreographers such as George Balanchine and Antony Tudor in ballet and Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey in modern dance, just as in music Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms constitute major figures in the Western canon, or Saba and Khaleqi exist in Iranian musical history. Nevertheless, for the scholar their relative merits as composers often involve issues of personal preference as well as technical evaluations.

In addition, in the current vogue of good scholarship, as the author of the essay it is important to situate myself in this essay, because for more than fifty years I have choreographed and staged Iranian dance. Therefore, it is important to disclose the elements that I chose to incorporate in my own works and the intentions that I had in creating dances for public performances so that the reader can evaluate where my choreographies should be situated in the spectrum of dance that I present in this essay.

Finally, in this survey I only address the works of those choreographers and choreographies that were created as works of art. I do not include in this discussion any commercial dance productions such as those found in Iranian popular music videos produced in the United States, nor the unfortunate, sleazy depictions of dance that were featured in the Iranian cinema during the Pahlavi period that I argue contributed to the negative and ambiguous images of dance in Iran and contributed significantly to the rise of choreophobia among many Iranians.

Choreography and Staging

Staging - As a practicing choreographer, I find that even the most sophisticated and educated reader can be unfamiliar with precisely what a choreographer does when he or she choreographs and prepares a dance for the stage, and what constitutes the difference between choreography and staging. I use the term staging to suggest that the individual, or individuals, responsible for the presentation have altered the original dances as little as possible for the viewer. Nevertheless, those individuals who create stagings, like the choreographers that I will address shortly, make choices. These choices may be simple ones: selecting the best dancers in the village and leaving out the weaker performers, shortening the dance by performing it within a shorter period than would be the case if the dance were being performed in its original context, for example in a village wedding, or orienting the dance in such a way that the viewer from outside can see the dance more easily by arranging for the performers to more frequently face the audience than in the original context. Most importantly, village and tribal groups, not only in Iran but

everywhere, rehearse before they go on stage in front of strangers; they want to appear at their best.

As an example of staging, as opposed to choreography, I will cite two examples from my own experience. In the first, I taught a group of female dancers to perform the bazi-ha-ye namayeshi, as described by Seyyed Abol-Qasem Enjavi-Shirazi. In the original context of the bazi-ha, the dancers improvise their movements to accompany a series of narrative verses. (Enjavi-Shirazi 1972; Shay 1995) These dancers were taught to improvise their movements so that each performance of the bazi-ha was different and to give the audience members a more realistic impression of how these theatrical games might have appeared in their original context. A second example that I used was a staging of the Persian Gulf dances (bandari), in which the dancers were given the freedom to improvise the movements that they had learned from a group of Iranian students, rather than follow a pre-set group of counts and figures.

In more general terms, the provincial exhibitions of Gilan and Khorasan (villages of Khvaf and Torbat-Jam), in Tehran, probably due to budgetary concerns, featured far fewer dancers than an observer in the actual villages might encounter during a village celebration. Clearly, the dancers that performed in these exhibitions also demonstrated high technical dance skills and as time passed they grew increasingly comfortable with their audiences.

Choreography - Choreography constitutes an art form in which the individual choreographer creates dances for public viewing in the same way that a composer creates original works for public consumption. In this essay, although I will address some examples of choreography that incorporate primarily western ballet or modern dance techniques, especially the themes the choreographer has chosen, the focus of this essay will center on those individuals who have utilized substantial elements of traditional Iranian dance in their works.

The range of dance compositions is vast, from a two or three minute choreography inspired by a single folk dance, but greatly elaborated by the choreographer, to a full-evening work in which a narrative drama, using significant traditional elements, unfolds before the audience. As an example of the latter I will cite Jamal's recent work, "The Golden Mask of Guran," a choreography, one of the most challenging and elaborate in the history of Iranian theatrical dance, in which Jamal utilized both Persian literature as an inspiration for his tale and used dance movements from Iranian folk dance, spiritual practices, and urban solo improvised dance as well as uniquely original movement elements that he created from a combination of western and Iranian sources, set to an original musical score by Ahmad Pejman. This constitutes a full-blown choreography, an original and unique piece of art, fully designed by a single individual, even though crucial traditional elements form an integral part of the design. The creation of an original choreography can sometimes require years of developing concepts, spatial and stage designs, creating original movements, and other elements of the final choreography.

It is important to grasp that, generally speaking, choreographers are more or less self-proclaimed. Unlike the case for composers, for whom university and conservatory courses exist in many places throughout the world, schools do not exist that teach choreography, and the few classes given in modern dance curricula in American colleges and universities labeled as "choreography" do not necessarily produce choreographers. This is particularly true of traditional dance. Choreographers of traditional dance frequently rise through the ranks of amateur or professional dance companies or they are frequently self-taught individuals, as in my case, who learn a variety of dance styles and feel an urge to create works based on those dance traditions for the stage.

Choreography differs significantly from staging in its intent by the choreographer to create a new original work, even when it is inspired by or utilizes multiple elements from traditional dance. Musical compositions in which the composer uses folk melodies as the basis or inspiration for the new work, are nevertheless original works in which the composer utilizes rhythmic and harmonic combinations, dynamic changes, unique instrumentation, and other formal musical elements at his or her disposal to create a new and original work. Antonin Dvorak's "Slavonic Dances" or Rubik Grigorian's "Iranian Folk Song Suite" constitute original new works and their composers did not intend to reproduce folk music on the stage; rather they used all of the musical elements at their disposal, within their specific stylistic parameters, in order to create fresh new works for their listeners.

In a similar manner, choreographers, while using traditional elements, create new works that are neither historical reconstructions nor anthropological reproductions. Like composers, choreographers work within specific stylistic traditions of their historical period and place. Bach composed within the "Baroque" style, Mozart worked within the "classical" style, and Beethoven worked within the "romantic" style, that is the elements they selected to compose their music, such as instrumental scoring, the forms of symphony, dance suite, concerto, etc., fell within the time and place in which they lived and worked. In dance, in selecting a stylistic tradition the choreographer may opt to work with the vocabulary of classical western ballet for their aesthetic and stylistic parameters, such as choreographers like Nejad Ahmadzadeh and Abdollah Nazemi, and later Nima Kiann, use in their works, or it may be a self-consciously new stylistic tradition such as that created by Jamal for his recent works, which he calls "contemporary-traditional."

History of Staging Iranian Dance in Iran

With the beginning of teaching western classical ballet by Madame Cornelli in 1928, followed by Madame Yelena Avdessian and Sarkis Djanbazian in the 1940s, all Iranian Armenians, small steps were taken to choreograph Iranian-inspired choreographies for their students in recitals. 4 Student recitals constitute a time-honored means for students to demonstrate to their parents and others what they have learned throughout their past year of training. Recitals give the instructors the opportunity to show their talents as choreographers and teachers, and showcase their students' progress. According to all sources, these three teachers, who trained thousands of Iranian children and young adults, held recitals that became annual events. (See Ramazani 2002). 5 In Iran, where public performances of dance was staunchly opposed by large numbers of the general public and religious figures as sinful displays of, particularly female, bodies these recitals were not open to the general public, but rather reserved for friends and family members of the young dancers, and perhaps some dignitaries. Anna Djanbazian, the daughter of Sarkis Djanbazian, has continued this tradition in the Iranian diaspora in Southern California, replicating the concerts created by her father as well as choreographing a large repertoire of new works for her students. (Djanbazian 2002).

Even at this beginning period of choreographing Iranian dance, these early ballet teachers, who were trained outside of Iran, turned to romantic, orientalist images largely found in Persian poetry to inspire their compositions. They of course came from a long Russian tradition of creating orientalist ballets. Kiann cites some of Madame Yelena's earliest choreographic works as "Rose of Shiraz," "Gulnara," and "Song of the Canary." (Kiann 2003). Choreographers thought, and continue to think and utilize literary motifs and themes, and fanciful "reconstructions" of dance practices of pre-Islamic periods, particularly the highly fictionalized portrayals of Sasanian and Achaemenian dances, of which we know

nothing, because they think that these themes will appeal to the patriotic sensibilities of their Iranian audiences.

The next significant figure that appears in the history of Iranian dance is a somewhat mysterious woman, Nilla Cram Cook, an American. She worked in some position in the American Embassy, but even more oddly she served the Iranian Government as "chief censor of theater and cinema" (Ramazani 2002, 171). Cram Cook founded the Iranian Ballet Company in the mid-1940s, which according to Ramazani, received royal patronage from Princess Ashraf Pahlavi, and toured extensively through Turkey, Lebanon, Greece, and India with government financial support in 1946-1948, and quickly closed when Cram Cook seemed to have suffered some kind of mental breakdown. (Ramazani 2002, 146-147; 164-238). Cram Cook's Iranian Ballet Company apparently gave the first modern, western-styled, but Iranian-themed public dance performance in Iranian history (Ramazani 2002, 171).

Ramazani's history, not only provides us with an informal picture of the inner workings of this short-lived company, but also provides some information about the repertoire, with some vivid descriptions of some of the choreographic movements and orientalist themes employed by Cram Cook and others, and the early lives of important figures in the Iranian dance world such as Nejad Ahmadzadeh (whom she describes as: "A young man in his early twenties with little formal education, Nejad was intelligent, shrewd, calculating, and brash." 176), and Aida Ahmadzadeh (nee Akhundzadeh), whom he later married and who, after Robert De Warren, took over the Iranian National Ballet Company.

The themes of the ballets created by Nilla Cram Cook underscore the point that literary and historical themes were the most popular inspiration for the creation of dance in Iran, a practice that continues into the present. "She was certain that the lyrical magic of our creations would touch the patriotic sensibilities of even the most common man—that the thematic material of their performances, the sedateness of our dances, and the poetry accompanying them would deflect any expectation of lascivious entertainment" (Ramazani 2002, 171). Cram Cook's attitude, shared by a few Iranians as well as a wide spectrum of Westerners, continues today as the many adherents of Iranian solo improvised dance in the West attempt to justify their dance form (Shay 1999). Cram Cook's idyllic hope of converting Iranians to the art of dance in the 1940s has never been realized, and widespread choreophobic attitudes among all segments of the Iranian public were reflected in 1979 when the Islamic Republic banned all public dance performances (except for male participants in regional folk dances), a ban that continues into the present. The use of euphemisms such as "harmonic muscular movements" (harekat-e mozun) has not lessened governmental and societal disapproval. Choreophobic attitudes persist among large segments of the Iranian diaspora as well. (Shay 1999)

Nevertheless, these productions were not, strictly speaking, Iranian traditional dance, they were western ballets and used western ballet movements. All of these early ballet experiences, especially the utilization of orientalist literary and romanticized historical themes and motifs, were a legacy the early choreographers bequeathed to the future, for these themes are widely thought to endow dance with some kind of legitimate artistic value. These productions continue today, as seen recently in Nima Kiann's Ballets Persans concert in Los Angeles in 2004. He choreographed dramatic works such as the remarkable ballet "Zan" (Woman), and the historically themed "Kaveh Ahangar" using modern ballet vocabulary and pointe work.

Regarding the use of literary and historical themes in choreographic contexts Jamal states: "Iranians are so choreophobic that choreographers and dancers are trying to give a 'green

card' to dance by grabbing on to poetry and history as legitimate ways of validating dance, and thus, making it appear respectable" (Personal communication. December 7, 2005).

Beginnings of Traditional Iranian Dance Production in the United States

Dance in the small Iranian diaspora in the United States of the 1950s begins with the public performances of several (mostly) female Iranian students, generally in student sponsored international talent shows or international folk dance festivals were held throughout the United States. These were largely amateur productions in which ethnic and immigrant communities displayed their dance traditions. (Shay 2006). In that decade female students from Iran were rather rare, male students constituted about 95% of the total of Iranians in America in that decade, but several of the young women agreed to appear in public dance performances. Although Najmeh Najafi (1953), writes of dancing in performances during her student years in the United States, we have no means of recapturing how those dances might have appeared, although her descriptions of the "Zoroastrian Fire Dance" and a "Slave Dance" would indicate a highly orientalist framework. (Shay 2005a)

My personal experience began in 1954 with Nasrin Hekmat Farrokh, an opera student at the University of Southern California, who was a highly accomplished dancer in the solo improvised tradition. She taught me the first movements that I learned. Her dances were purely abstract in the classical Iranian tradition, as were the dances performed by Mahin Shahrivar, Homa Mojallal and others. 6 For special shows, Hekmat Farrokh might create a rudimentary plot, like those described by Ramazani with peasant boys and girls meeting and dancing, but she did not, as I remember, attempt to create historical reproductions or Persian poetic themes. In fact, her dances embodied the highest quality of the styles and movements that originated in the Safavid and Qajar periods, detailed by Azardokht Ameri in her important essay (2003), and in most of these student performances she employed the improvisational and stylistic elements that I describe (1999, 28-55). Hekmat Farrokh performed her dances to old recordings of Saba and other traditional sources playing rengs and chahar mezbabs.

Essentially, these early choreographies were simple. The stage was generally empty except for the dancer, who generally performed elaborate forms of majlesi(solo improvised dance), with simple choreographies designed to avoid repetition.

Beginning in 1956, I began to choreograph a few dances that I had learned from the many Iranian and Afghani students with whom I had been in contact during my university years. This culminated in a series of concerts that were performed in several Iranian student events that came to the attention of Iranian government officials and resulted in receiving a fellowship to study in Iran in 1958.

In Iran, I was able to see many dance events, both in urban and rural areas. As an employee of the Fine Arts Administration 7, I attended a few rehearsals of the newly formed "National Folkloric Music, Song and Dance Ensemble" directed by Nejad Ahmadzadeh, the goal of which was to "revive, restore and develop all kinds of national and folkloric music, song and dance" (Kiann 2003). The dances that this fledgling company performed, through the influence of Ahmadzadeh, were heavily infused with balletic elements. The company appeared in concerts both in Iran and abroad for several years. 8

1958 was an important year for those interested in the founding and development of state sponsored folk dance companies. Bayanihan from the Philippines, Moiseyev of the former USSR, the Georgian State Ensemble, LADO, Kolo, the Bulgarian State Ensemble, and many other companies performed at the massive world fair in Brussels (which I attended on my

way to Iran), and those performances constituted the most popular and well-attended events of the fair, which was attended by millions of visitors. I suggest that those performances inspired the Iranian Government, which had a very impressive pavilion there, to instigate the founding of the Iranian company directed by Ahmadzadeh, because this was the era in which many national governments discovered that large scale, professional performing folk dance ensembles were financially profitable and created positive impressions of their respective nation states. Iran was only one of the countries that seized the opportunity of touring their newly formed troupes. The Philippines, Senegal, and Mexico, among many others began to send their national dance companies on major tours. The founding of these state sponsored national dance companies followed in the wake of the notion conceived in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, best epitomized in the concept of Rousseau's "noble savage," that the peasantry constituted the repository of all that was pure and authentic in the national ethos of the state. This concept spread to other parts of the world, especially with the rise of nationalistic sentiments, including Iran and other nations of the Middle East beginning in the 1950s and expanding in the 1960s and 1970s, and nationalist sentiments inspired major efforts to collect folk songs, tales, and dances.

In 1960, upon my return to the United States, I began to choreograph dances that I had learned in Iran, and I was greatly aided in this process through finding a book, *Narodny Tanets (National Dances)* by Russian choreographer Tamara Tkachenko (1954) in the UCLA library. This book provided the basic movements, steps, and detailed stylistic descriptions of dances from all of the seventeen republics of the former Soviet Union, and it was at this point, through the names of the dances and the movements described and illustrated with line drawings that the dances of Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Georgia, and Tajikistan, that I realized that the dances from these republics were closely related, if not identical to Iranian traditions. A good friend translated these sections for me and I began to use them in the dances that I began to choreograph for a student group at UCLA. These newly acquired dances greatly expanded the material with which I began to work.

In those early years I choreographed dances from Gilan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. These were not dances that were carefully collected by folklorists and dance ethnologists in the field, but rather dances that were presented in this book for purposes of staging and choreographed in the manner approved by the Soviet Union. This does not mean that the dances were devoid of any ethnographic detail, but rather that they were artistically distanced from any practices that might be seen in the field. All of this was augmented by materials that I began to receive from the republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan in the Soviet Union. Through a correspondence of many years with the Academies of Science, the National Libraries, and the Committees for Friendship and Cultural Relations of those republics, I received numerous books on dance, music, costume, ethnography, geography, and films, a large number of photographs, and phonograph records of dance music, all of which to varying degrees contributed to my knowledge of Iranian dance.

This was the dawning of the period in which issues of authenticity in the performance of folk and traditional dance became an important presentational element. The dance programs and publicity materials were filled with details of how the artistic directors of large state-sponsored companies had always displayed an interest in village folk dances and how they braved the discomforts of that life to conduct research. (Shay 1999, 2006). However, many of them like Igor Moiseyev of the USSR, who was one of the most emulated choreographers of the period, Amalia Hernandez of Mexico, Nejad Ahmadzadeh and, later,

Robert De Warren were all trained ballet dancers, and however much they claimed to reproduce authentic folk dances on the stage, their works frequently displayed the technical and aesthetic characteristics, aesthetics and choreographic techniques of balletic character dance. Character or "national" dance is that portion of classical ballet that uses ballet movement vocabulary to choreograph "peasant" dances. It is important that the reader grasp that these dances are not traditional in any way; they are ballet choreographies. In Iran in 1966, Robert De Warren, a British ballet dancer and choreographer, assisted by his wife, Jacqueline, was appointed by the Fine Arts Ministry to direct the National Ballet Company of Iran. More importantly for the focus of this essay, in 1971, he was assigned to conduct field research, and then to reorganize or re-found the company founded by Ahmadzadeh (now appointed to oversee the construction and organization of the Rudaki Hall cultural center in Tehran). (Kiann 2003)

The new, or reorganized, folk dance company, now a part of the Ministry of Fine Arts and known as the Iran National Folklore Organization (Sazman-e Melli-ye Folklor-e Iran), became known as the "Mahalli Dancers of Iran" when touring outside of Iran, "founded nine years ago (1967)" (Mahalli Dancers souvenir program, 1976; Iranian National Folklore Organization. Program, October 13, 1976). The size and scope of this newly conceived company directed by De Warren, especially under the massively increased financing provided by the support of Farah Pahlavi, constituted almost a new dance company in comparison to the modest performances of the company that Ahmadzadeh had directed, which had comparatively little financial backing.

Because of this increased funding, De Warren was able to create pieces that were the most elaborate works heretofore produced in Iran from the visual aspect of sets, number of dancers, costumes, musical accompaniment, and other staging strategies. The importance of the influence that the repertoire and the widespread availability of its video recordings for the development of the staging of Iranian dance in the Iranian diaspora cannot be underestimated: numerous companies outside of Iran slavishly copied de Warren's choreographies, often believing that these were actual village dances that one could view in the countryside.

The repertoire, almost exclusively developed and created by de Warren, included dances and choreographies from many of the major regions of Iran (Azerbaijan, Gilan, the Persian Gulf, Jiroft (Kerman Province), Turkoman folklore, Kurdistan, Bojnurd (Khorasan Province), Kohkuliye (Fars Province), in addition to several original choreographies of "historical" dances (Safavid and Qajar period), literary themed choreographies, and a Sufi ceremony. (Souvenir Program, 1976; Iranian National Folklore Organization. Program October 13, 1976)

Nevertheless, in common with Igor Moiseyev and Amalia Hernandez, De Warren's work exhibited the idea that the actual peasant repertory—dances, music, and costumes—needed a "professional" touch. Dances were "improved" through training the dancers in ballet, costumes were given designer colors and "improved" fashion elements altered to conform to the taste and aesthetic values of middle class urban audiences, and music was "arranged" for large theaters. All of these practices were common to many companies like the world famous Ballet Folklorico of Mexico, the Moiseyev Dance Company of the former Soviet Union, and Bayanihan of the Philippines.

While de Warren's choreographies of folk dances closely followed the models established by companies like Moiseyev, he clearly showed a respect for the material that he choreographed, and featured live performances of noted regional folk musicians. He had little time to create more sophisticated choreographies since the company had a short life

span before the revolutionary government closed down the company in 1979. In the several performances that I witnessed he utilized very authentic music from the Turkomans, Baluchistan, Gilan, and Kurdistan. 10

His choreographies of solo improvised dance, however, constituted highly orientalist images of Iran. De Warren's choreographies of "Dances of Chehel-Sotun Palace" and "Haft Peikar" (The Seven Portraits), suggested by a tale from the poet Nezami, followed firmly in the style of Russian choreographers of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, in the creation of fantasy and romance that never formed any actual historical period of Iranian history. In the "Dances of Chehel-Sotun Palace" (in Isfahan), for example, the choreography opens with the dancers posed as a tableau vivant, and as the music begins, the female dancers come to life and perform choreographed versions of solo improvised dance that one might witness at a contemporary wedding or party, and for the male dancers, who dance later in the work, De Warren concocted some ballet movements and a style of "masculine" dance that would never have constituted a part of male dancing from the Safavid (1501-1785) era that he claimed to choreographically represent. In fact, dancers, both male and female were hired, members of the court did not dance in public spectacles as de Warren's choreography suggests. (See Shay 2005c).

The "Haft Peikar," because it was unrelated to any specific historical period allowed de Warren to give free rein to his choreographic impulses. In this work, the princesses are posed inside of seven picture frames and step out, one at a time, to dance, as the prince, in the same "masculine" style designed for this company by de Warren, skips about the stage. In the program notes, de Warren claims that the work was choreographed "after two years of research" (Mahalli Dancers. Souvenir program, 1976), and that his research consisted of taking miniature paintings and laying "twenty or so of them side by side" in order to recreate an authentic reproduction of dances performed four centuries ago. He claims that: "Each step and gesture is a reproduction of the real traditional painting (De Warren and Williams, 1973, 29; Mahalli Dancers Program, 1976). I have pointed out elsewhere (Shay 2002b), that historical reconstruction from historical illustrations, or vague descriptions of travelers accounts is not possible. Even recent ballet classics, such as the "Afternoon of a Faun" by Vaclav Nijinsky, or dances of the Baroque period for which we possess careful and detailed notation, as well as other works from the 20th century, are fraught with difficulty for the dance historian and other individuals who attempt to recreate exact duplications of earlier dance performances. Imagine, then, attempting to recreate a dance tradition from 400 years ago for which we have no evidence but stylized illustrations and miniatures for a dance tradition that possessed no form of notation, even in the present.

Anthony Shay, Choreographer

Although I participated for a few years in many ethnic community and mainstream folk dance groups, it was within the mode of representation based on state folk dance company performances that I developed as a choreographer. I was caught up in the spectacle and color of performances of Lado, the Georgian State Folk Ensemble, Ballet Folklorico, the Uzbek Dance Ensemble, Bahor, and Bayanihan. I attended every possible performance of these ensembles and absorbed their aesthetic. I particularly regard Zvonko Ljevaković, the choreographer and first artistic director of Lado, the Croatian State Ensemble of Folk Songs and Dances as a mentor. A performance of Lado can still inspire me (November 12, 2002). The tool that I used the most was one that I learned from Ljevaković: the maximum use of authentic detail of movement, costume, and music to create the illusion of reality and authenticity. The use of authentic details requires intensive research. I spent hours in

reading, learning dances in workshops and rehearsals of Lado, attending seminars in Yugoslavia and locally, and again, reading. To this end I amassed a huge library of books, articles, music, recordings, films and other research tools to support my work. I made frequent journeys to the countries of origin for research. Following a research trip to Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan in 1976, I returned to the United States, inspired with my findings, and in 1977 I founded the AVAZ International Dance Theatre and began to choreograph a large number of works from this large Iranian cultural region. After all, I was not a native and felt the need to gather evidence to support the work that I choreographed. One of my greatest compliments came after the performance of a wedding from Northern Croatia (1974). An elderly woman came up to me with tears in her eyes and said, "I was married in that village and that's just how it was." But, of course, that is not how it was: Her wedding lasted five days and nights; my choreographed version lasted 17 minutes. My artistic success in this choreography consisted in the inclusion of the numerous details of authenticity that permitted that woman to relive her wedding—the same process whereby a person who creates perfumes from rose petals so successfully reproduces the essence of the rose that the person who smells it immediately envisions a rose. It is an illusion, but with depth and passion on my part.

At this point I want to make clear that, in spite of the intensive use of authentic elements of movement, music, and costuming, I have never believed that my works were duplicates of village performances. They were always intended as works of art; I never attempted to perform ethnography on the stage. My choreographies were intended as original works that utilized authentic elements from a wide variety of traditional sources. I considered the elderly woman's comment as an affirmation of my goal to present dance in such a way that people believed in the illusion that I artfully created that they were viewing an actual village performance.

For the production of works of solo improvised dance that formed the basis for my urban dances, I never turned to poetic images or historical reconstructions, but rather I concentrated on the use of the beauty inherent in the improvisation and geometric construction which informs this choreographic tradition. I felt the impossibility of reproducing historical dance on the stage. For example, we know that the dancers of the Qajar period employed gymnastics and athletic movements in their dances, all of which is lost to us.

What I want to demonstrate in this essay is that the politics of identity and ethnic representation, through its most visual icon, traditional dance, performed in public, theatrical venues, is dynamic, contingent, and highly contested. The manipulation and use of folk dance as a vehicle for the visual representation of ethnic immigrant communities has changed through time and traditional dance cannot be viewed as a primordial unchanging artifact of immigrant life. American historian John R. Gillis reminds us: "The core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely, a sense of sameness over time and space, is sustained by remembering; and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity.... We need to be reminded that memories and identities are not fixed things, but representations or constructions of reality, subjective rather than objective phenomena" (1994, 3).

Jamal - Turning Through Time:

The Quiet Revolution in Iranian Dance

Jamal's recent choreographic creations constitute a valuable case study for this essay because his creative philosophy reflects the major changes that are beginning to inform how

traditional dance is staged in the United States in the twenty first century. After coming to the United States from his native Iran, he began his career as an architect, turned to the visual arts, and for many years he had a successful career as a painter of American Southwest art, which still continues. His choreography reflects his architectural and visual arts training.

Jamal's choreographic career began with a group choreography of "Shateri" in 1992. It was the first known choreography of this dance created for a group, and as a work of art. This choreography became a symbol of the AVAZ International Dance Theatre, and soon after many dance companies began to copy the work or create similar versions of Jamal's choreography because of its huge popularity in the Iranian American community.

"Charkh: Turning Through Time" is the title of one of Jamal's newest choreographic creations for the AVAZ International Dance Theatre of Los Angeles, the company that he now directs. It is also the theme and message that informs his research, his artistic life and philosophy, and the choreographic strategies he uses for the development of a fresh approach to an ancient form of cultural expression. He states:

Iranian dance is not well understood, even in Iran. Unlike poetry, which constitutes the major form of cultural and aesthetic expression throughout the Middle East, dance, especially as an art form performed in public has never had the sustained support, development and expansion needed to become a true art form.

Dance in Iran is an ancient expressive form. We have numerous statues, miniatures, illustrations on ceramics, coffee house paintings, murals, and other iconographic evidence for this form of cultural expression for at least six millennia. Theoretically, because of its improvisational nature, Iranian dance can be can be infinitely expanded and developed, both conceptually and aesthetically. My choreography is the essence of my emotion, and I want to connect with my audiences on an emotional level. (Personal interview March 3, 2002)

"Charkh: Turning in Time," is a contemporary exploration of the Sufi universe and it was a breakthrough in choreographing Iranian dance. The complexity of the choreographic compositions and concept, which contrasted dramatically with the simplicity of its choreography, movements, and costumes, brought him national recognition by being broadcast on National Public Television in 2004. The audience of AVAZ International Dance Theatre, which had come to expect colorful folk dances, was stunned to see this stark, contemporary drama. The work garnered several fellowships and awards for Jamal. Since the 1970s, when New Age "philosophy" swept through the United States, many Americans began to investigate Sufism as a form of mysticism and a new method of reaching self-actualization. It is clear that most of those who read about Sufi spiritualism in a cursory fashion did not understand its meaning, as one could witness with Madonna, a popular super star who claimed to espouse Sufi philosophy. Nevertheless, any artistic work that utilized this theme acquired a degree of popularity. Following Jamal's huge success with "Charkh: Turning Through Time," several Iranian choreographers began to stage works with Sufi themes.

Jamal's newest choreography is his 2005 production of "The Golden Mask of Guran," inspired by the tale of Bahram-e Gur from the Shah-Nameh. In the first version of the work, "Guran" staged in 2003, Jamal told the tale in his own adaptation from the point of view of the gur-e khar (az didgah-e gur-ha), not from Ferdowsi's narrative.

The work is a full evening narrative dance drama utilizing many genres of traditional and contemporary movements that moves even farther away from the traditional ways of staging Iranian dance that he had previously created: He painted the dancers' faces,

created new contemporary costumes, and turned the stage into a forest, as the dancers used movements from his unique new movement vocabulary, which Jamal especially created for this new work.

The new choreography constituted an avant garde approach that, in its first 2003 version called "Guran," startled many of the older Iranian Americans. They found the work to be too sophisticated and they had a difficult time understanding it, even though the work received critical acclaim from non-Iranians and dance critics. The Los Angeles Times dance critic Lewis Segal stated that "The Golden Mask of Guran was one of the outstanding achievements of the Southern California dance community" (April 19, 2005).

Many in the Iranian audience resisted new approaches to choreography; they wanted to cling to traditional presentations. When he recreated the work in 2005, he realized that this rapid departure from his past work was too complicated and so in the revision of the story that he staged under the new title "The Golden Mask of Guran," without changing the basic choreography, he turned the viewpoint of the narrative to one of the human characters, Azadeh. The audience had an easier time accepting the new version of the work because the audience could connect with the human character that he introduced in the new version. Jamal states: "I am not choreographing to entertain Iranians. I am choreographing to introduce my culture to non-Iranians. I use Iranian tales in a contemporary fashion, in today's language to attract newer, younger audiences with the hope that their curiosity will guide them to learn the depth of Iranian culture. Still, my duty is to open the minds of my Iranian audiences to new ways of seeing art and artistic expression" (personal interview January 30, 2005).

I am an artist, not a savior of national folk dances. Nothing that I do on the stage will affect the performances of dance in the field. My creations will not affect what people in rural areas of Iran perform during their celebrations. In the beginning, I began to stage and choreograph folk and classical dances in a very traditional way. I will continue to use traditional dance as an inspiration, but now I am expanding my creative ideas. I want to create a whole new world of dance and take Iranian dance to a new place. I am able to do this because. I am happy to have the freedom to create. This comes from my training as a painter. I do not want to be type-cast as a folk choreographer or a modern dance choreographer. I am entirely different and I want to connect with my audiences in my new way. (Jamal December 30, 2005)

Witnessing the new generation of choreographers, I am able to see that the choreographing and staging of Iranian traditional dance has a bright future. Its beauty will continue to inspire artists who hold a wide variety of aesthetic viewpoints and they will take it in new and exciting directions. We will all have to adjust our notions of what constitutes "authentic." These new developments in Iranian dance will ensure that Iran and its people will continue to be represented with the highest degree of artistry and authenticity. As long as Iranian dance is produced as an art work, and not a commercial and vulgar commodity, Iranian dance will bestow dignity and honor on its people.

Notes

1. I use the word "Persia" here because this term, as opposed to "Iran," because "Persia" conjures up romantic and orientalist images in the minds of many non-Iranians of different backgrounds. Westerners, in particular, see Persia as a land of storied architectural monuments like caliphal palaces and mosques and minarets, harems with flowing pools and scantily clad odalisques, and other Hollywood images encountered in films like "Omar Khayyam" and

"Kismet" from the 1950s. Orientalism refers to the conflation of the Middle East into one vast, timeless place in which Iranians, Turks, and Arabs are all the same and, for the outsider, all Middle Eastern spaces, architecture and clothing are the same and everyone wears turbans, robes, veils, and female "harem" costumes familiar to Hollywood moviegoers that are found in the many "Thousand and One Nights" films.

2. My personal experience was fortunate, for in 1958 I accompanied an American film maker and his wife throughout Iran as an interpreter, and I was able to view dance in many areas as they filmed them.

3. In the United States, federal, state, and local funding agencies for the arts regularly assemble panels of experts in music, dance, theater, the visual arts, etc., to evaluate and recommend funding for those projects which are deemed outstanding. I have participated on a number of those panels and they constitute a large responsibility for those who are panel members.

4. Ramazani (2002, 8-9) claims that Madame Cornelli was a "White Russian," by which I do not know if she means a political stance, or an individual from Byelorussia (literally White Russia), and the classes she attended focused on "learning Russian folk dances" (2002, 9). Kiann (2003), on the other hand states that "all three of them with [sic] Armenian origin."

5. Ramazani's book must be used with some caution by dance researchers. In general her eyewitness accounts of dance events in which she participated or viewed serve as an excellent source of a period of history of the dance of Iran (1940-1950) that has not been well documented. On the other hand, her romantic and orientalist statements about ancient and historical dance practices (page 4, 171, 110) for example, are incorrect and some of her observations are lifted (uncredited) from Rezvani's (1962) book, which suffers from the same problems.

6. Although I use the word "classic" here as a form of shorthand, nevertheless, as both Azardokht Ameri (2003) and I (1999, 2005) have pointed out, strictly speaking, there is no true classical tradition in Iranian dance. The appearance of the current tradition labeled as "classical," unlike Iranian urban music, does not possess the requisite elements of a classical tradition such as a named vocabulary (such as exists in Uzbekistan), an academy, a standardized method of teaching, etc.

7. I served as principal flutist in the Tehran Symphony Orchestra.

8. I thank Azardokht Ameri for providing me with photocopies of several articles written in the Iranian media, particularly majaleh-ye muzik, which detail the activities of the newly founded (1958) Company of Iranian Folk and National Dances.

9. Complicating the narrative of performing companies in Iran that I am attempting to weave in this article, the Iranian National Ballet Company, came under the direction of Aida Ahmadzadeh, the wife of Nejad Ahmadzadeh, a fine dancer in the Iranian tradition, as well as a trained classical ballerina. During her tenure she created several Iranian themed classical ballets for the company (see Kiann 2003).

10. I saw two performances of the Mahalli Dancers in September 1976 at the USC campus in Los Angeles, each evening the company performed a different program, and a performance at Rudaki Hall in Tehran on October 13, 1976.

11. A similar work formed a part of the repertoire of Bahor, the Uzbek National Company, but other than featuring seven women representing seven ethnic groups, the choreography had little in common with that of de Warren's. In this work, too, the princesses are posed inside of seven picture frames and step out, one at a time, to dance, as the prince, in the same "masculine" style designed for this company by de Warren, skips about the stage.

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