



BABILLA, ASHUR BANIPAL IBRAHIM

BABILLA, ASHUR BANIPAL IBRAHIM (Āšur Banipāl Ebrāhim Bābillā, b. Tehran, Iran, 25 June 1944; d. New York, 30 March 2011) actor, director, playwright, and visual artist ([Figure 1](#)).

Born to Shedrach Babilla and Luba Tamraz, Bani, as he was usually called by relatives and friends, was raised in an Assyrian-Presbyterian family in Tehran. He completed his elementary and secondary education at Mehr and [Firuz Bahrām](#) schools, and he received his bachelor's degree in theology in 1968 from the American University and his master's degree in 1971 at the Near East School of Theology, both in Beirut. As he recalls in an interview years later, he was fascinated to realize that "all Western theologians are suddenly attracted to arts and many of the good art books are authored by them and not the art critics" (*Āyandegān*, 1973, p. 4) This fascination, expounded by the influence of pioneering ideas of Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), the French surrealist playwright and director, marked the beginning of his long journey to explore the affinities between religion and theater. He soon played a few minor roles in the university's extracurricular programs.

Banipal's fascination with Artaud and the emphasis he put on the correlation between theater and religion continued to be the quintessential theme in most of his own writings and performances throughout his artistic life. In acting also, just as did Artaud, Bani placed heavy emphasis on invoking deeply rooted



feelings of the actors and argued that “while actors are wearing masks in their daily lives, in theater, these masks are torn off and we are facing the inner self of the actor” (*Rastākiz*, art section, 8 Šahrivar, 1356 Š./28 August 1977) . “Acting,” as he indicates in another interview, “is a dangerous art ... it reveals all the buried aspects of actor’s character.” (*Rastākiz*, art section, 12 Bahman 1356Š./2 February 1978).

While he was still in Beirut, he wrote three plays in English: *Requiem Aeternam Deo* (1970), *Gomore or Hosea! Where are you* (1970), and *Homo* (1971). Before returning to Iran in 1972, he directed two plays: *The Chairs* (1952) by Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994) and *Waiting for Godot* (1949) by Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), both notable examples of the Theater of the Absurd. These choices in essence show Banipal’s outlook on human faith and his love for Jesus beyond conventional discourse of organized faith, which continued to be the core theme in many of his plays and writings thereafter. “A temple,” as he states in *All About Jees*, a play in English he wrote and performed in New York’s La Mama Theater in 1995, “is a concrete shape of your prejudices ... if you want to know where evil dwells look in the house of god.”

Returning to Iran in 1972 he first intended to become a Presbyterian minister, but, due to his radical belief in liberation theology, he “became a ‘persona non grata’ with its elders and was effectively booted out of the church” (Robert Kohler, *Los Angeles Times*, 8 September 1990). From 1972 to 1973, while teaching English literature at Tehran University’s Faculty of Literature and Foreign Languages, he directed a number of plays in English, produced by the International Theater of Tehran: Jean Genet’s (1910-1986) *The Maids* (1947), Luigi Pirandello’s (1867-1936) *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), and Federico Garcia Lorca’s (1898-1936) *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1936).

Staging of these plays brought Banipal recognition and popularity in the circle of Iranian avant-garde artists. On October 1973 he was invited by Bižan Šaffāri, the president and co-founder, along with Fereyduh Rahnemā and others, of the Theater Workshop (Kārgāh-e Namāyeš), to join the Workshop. Kārgāh-e Namāyeš was an experimental center set up to help Iranian actors, directors, and stage designers, “to exercise and experiment, independent of commonly accepted professional restrictions” (*The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theater* V, p. 205).

He started his collaboration with Kārgāh by directing two one-act plays, *The Stronger* (1889) by August Strindberg (1849-1912) and *Lady Aoi* (1954) by Yukio



Mishima (1925-1970), and he established his fame as a rising artist in theater. *Āker-e-zamān (Dies Irae)*, his first play in Persian (May 1973), was a collage of pieces, in verse and prose, borrowed from “Beckett, Mishima, Sadeq Hedayat, François Villon, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Jorge Luis Borges, and Forough Farrokhzad, along with a few small pieces of his own writings,” (Korramzādeh Eshfehāni, P. 455). The play stirred mixed reception. It instigated severe criticism among conservative intellectuals and mainstream media (Reyšahri, P. 192), on the one hand, and, on the other, earned praise as the work of an artist “who defies boundaries” (*Āyandegān*, 1974, p. 6) and in whose work “beauty and magic” are intertwined (*Tamāšā*, p. 68). Of the many plays that Banipal wrote in Persian before the closure of the Workshop in November 1979, only a few were staged during his five years collaboration with this center. Nor were any of his writings published, in part because of their unconventional and often contentious nature.

Banipal had also an interest in visual arts, and “in his early childhood he would sit around the house and draw sketches of household objects.” (Ibrahim Babilla, Telephone Interview, 26 April 2012). Banipal’s paintings were as controversial as his writings and were found contentious even by the less biased standards of pre-revolution society in Iran. Although his works were exhibited in Iran America Society and City Gallery (Galery-e šahr, 1977), they did not earn critical significance (Figure 2, Figure 3). The majority of Banipal’s paintings, as held by the artist/critic Nikzad Nodjoumi, are marked by a trend of unstudied naiveté, in part because he did not have any academic background in visual arts (Interview, 26 October 2012). The innovative posters he designed for his plays, however, enjoyed critical acclaim for being “among the most progressive theatrical posters in the history of poster in Iran” (*Āraš Tanhā’i*, pp. 14-15; Figure 4).

It was during his last exhibition in the City Gallery in 1978 that a warrant was issued for his arrest for displaying erotic nude self-portraits. Although never arrested, Banipal left Iran for Europe in December 1980, after almost a year of hiding. A few months later he landed in California, and he taught acting and drama in the University of Southern California and directed a number of plays, including Berthold Brecht’s (1898-1956) *Jungle of Cities* (1921-1924) and his own play *Fešār-e dandān* (Gnashing of teeth). A year later he moved to New York, where he spent the rest of his life.

In New York, he founded a theater troupe named Purgatorio Ink; wrote and directed numerous plays; translated plays into Persian (including Berthold



Brecht's *Drums in the Night* and *In the Jungle of Cities*, Joe Orton's *Loot*, Strindberg's *The Stronger*, and Mishima's *The Lady Aoi*); created many paintings and sculptures; wrote a few short stories (e.g., "Execution Style," "A Tale of Two Daddies," and "Rich Women Must Die"); acted in two movies (*The Suitors*, directed by Qāsem Ebrāhimiān, 1988, and *Mr. Nobody*, directed by Bahman Solṭāni, 2002, in which he also co-authored the script); and taught theater at New York University's Experimental Theater Wing for a short period of time in 1981, as well as at Bard College from 1989 to 1996. His translation of "Maḥbuba va āl," an acclaimed short story by Rezā Dānešvar (b. 1948) appeared as "Mahboubeh and the Demon Ahl" in *Strange Times, My Dear: Pen Anthology of Contemporary Iranian Literature* (ed. Nahid Mozaffari, 2005, pp 190-214).

Banipal's radical and nonconformist artistic ideas brought him mixed reviews and interpretations by critics and theatergoers in the United States. Some compared the flamboyancy of his writings with such authors as Kundera, Nabakov, and Conrad (Cote), while some others described his works as manifestation of "loneliness of exile in all its permutations: from one's country, from one's self, from the touch of another human being" (Cusack). "Although some theatergoers will find his style less than appealing," as held by another critic, "his challenging and irreverent outlook ultimately suggests a form of bleak redemption" (Rousuck).

Religion, politics, and sex, as he emphasized in an interview that was reposted on 2 March 2011, were the core subject matters in many of Banipal's artistic creations both in visual and dramatic arts. "Basically, there are three themes in all my work—sex, politics, and religion—and all are inseparable" (Horowitz).

After long struggle with complications following heart bypass surgery, Banipal died in Lenox Hill Hospital of New York on 31 March 2011. On 17-18 February 2012, in celebration of his works, a two-day event titled "Suddenly Something, Recklessly Gay" was held by a group of his friends, colleagues, and fans at the Jerry H. Labowitz Theater of New York University (Figure 5). He was among the five Iranian writers who received, on June 2005, the Hellman-Hammett Award, given annually to writers under political persecution.

SELECTED WORKS



In Persian

Ākar-e zamān (Dies irae), 1974.

Čahārdah manzel (Fourteen stages), 1979.

Emšab šab-e mahtābeh (Tonight is a moonlit night), 1975.

Fešār-e dandān. (The play was rewritten in English as *Gnashing of Teeth* and was staged at the University of Southern California in 1980.)

Jašn (Festivity), 1978.

Malakut-e mordagān (Kingdom of the dead), 1978.

Sā'at-e šešom (Hora sexta), 1977.

Yakbandān, 1978 (Figure 6).

In English

All about Jeez, 1995.

Assyrian Monkey Fantasy, 2004.

Exile and Kingdom, 1985.

Homo, 1971.

Hosea! Where are you? 1970.

Grand Central Paradise, 1987.

I Die for Bruce Willis, 2006.

Othello and the Circumcised Turk, 1996.

Requiem Aeternam Deo, 1970.

Something Something Uber Alles (Das Jackpot), 1998.

Suddenly Something Recklessly Gay (ca. 1993)



Three Angels Dancing on a Needle, 1989-1990.

The True Story of a Woman Born in Iran and Raised to Heaven in Manhattan, 1991.

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Āyandegān, 7/1804, Tehran, 26 Ādar 1352 Š./16 December 1973, p. 4.

Ibid., 7/1927, Tehran, 30 Ordibehešt 1353 Š./19 May 1974, p. 6.

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David Cote, "Ashur Banibal Babilla," *New York Times Magazine*, 9 April 2011, available for purchase at <https://www.legacy.com/guestbooks/nytimes/sponsor-guestbook.aspx?n=assurbanipal-babilla&pid=150103724&cid=keep>.

Tim Cusack, "The Assyrian Monkey Fantasy," *New York International Fringe Festival Review*, 15 August 2004, available at <http://www.nytheatre.com/Show/Review/2004177>.

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Robert Kohler, *Los Angeles Times*, 8 September 1990.

Setāreh Ḳorramzādeh Eşfehāni, *Kārgāh-e namāyeš: az āghāz tā pāyān*, Tehran, 2008.

Nahid Mozaffari, ed. *Strange Times, My Dear: Pen Anthology of Contemporary Iranian Literature*, New York, 2005, pp 190-214.

Nikzad Nodjoumi, Interview, 26 October 2012.

Rastākiz, culture and art section, Tehran, 8 Šahrivar 1356 Š./28 August 1977.

Rastākiz, culture and art section, Tehran, 12 Bahman 1356 Š./2 February 1978.

Hamid Reżā Reyşahri, *Kārgāh-e Namāyeš*, Tehran, 2007.



J. Wynn Rousuck, “‘Suddenly Something’...holds nothing sacred,” *The Baltimore Sun*, 11 March 1994, available at http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1994-03-11/entertainment/1994070176_1_babila-bani-ribald.

The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre V. Asia/Pacific, London, 2001, p. 51.

Tamāšā, 3/145, Tehran, 29 Dey 1352 Š./19 January 1974, p. 68.

Āraš Tanhā’i, *Tandis*, 21 Dey 1389Š./, P. 14,15.

Search terms:

بابیلا اشور بانپال ابراهیم	babila,ashour banipal ibrahim	baabela,aashour banipal ebrahim	baabila,aashoor bani paal ibrahim
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