



BAQQĀL-BĀZĪ

BAQQĀL-BĀZĪ (lit. grocer play), a form of improvised, popular slapstick comedy, the origins of which can be traced to buffoons who performed at the courts of kings, to such merry, grotesque pageants as the *bar nešastan-e kūsa* (beardless man's mount) and the *mīr-e nowrūzī* (prince of the New Year) from the Sasanian period (Gaffary, pp. 362-63), or possibly to the extravagant goat-costumed dances under the Safavids (ibid., pp. 363-64). *Baqqāl-bāzī* is distinguished among the various forms of popular comedy in Iran by its own set of rules. It is performed at teahouses (*qahwa-kāna*) or private residences during weddings, or birth or circumcision parties. The principal characters in this genre were a rich miserly grocer and his lazy, absent-minded servant who was inclined to do the opposite of his master's bidding, thus provoking a comic response from the audience (Bayzā'ī, p. 170). The servant was generally played by an actor in blackface (*sīāh*), who would tease and make fun of people and things. The plays were about bullies who stole goods, particularly yogurt from the grocer's stall, and hit one another in the face with it. Other *baqqāl-bāzī* characters were the *māstī* (or *māssī*, yogurt seller, in winter processions performed in Arāk; Enjavī, pp. 67-71), the *čordakī*, and the *rīšakī* (ibid.). Travelers in Iran in 1812 report seeing a comedy from a house terrace, which must have been a *baqqāl-bāzī* (Freygang, pp. 328-39, quoted in Rezvani, p. 114). In it the yogurt seller was approached by a character wearing different disguises in each scene, pretending to buy yogurt but in fact stealing it each time. The yogurt seller is not only a victim of theft but also ends up with his face covered in yogurt.



In *baqqāl-bāzī*, as in the Commedia dell'Arte, there was no written script but a series of improvisations on a given plot. Gobineau, who stayed in Iran twice between the years of 1855 and 1863, says (p. 404) that *baqqāl-bāzīs* were crude farces or “beggars’ plays,” likely to evolve into solid comedies of the Goldoni variety, for instance. The valuable text from 1294/1877, Ḥosayn Khan’s *Joḡrāfiā-ye Eṣfahān* (pp. 86-87), gives first-hand information on a company of buffoons that performed in *baqqāl-bāzī*. He states that such plays were originally created out of public necessity and that, although they appeared entertaining, in fact they contained precious indications of the rules of social behavior and served as a moral guide to those who refused to be influenced by sermons or moral injunctions, human errors and shortcomings and their consequences being the subject matter of the plays. Like all jests, *baqqāl-bāzī* on occasion helped to redress an injustice. Ḥosayn Khan tells the story of one of Isfahan’s acting groups’ good deeds. When one of the Persian kings (presumably Faḥ-‘Alī Shah, in Ša‘bān, 1240/April, 1824, cf. Fasā‘ī, pp. 170-72) launched a punitive expedition against Isfahan’s troublemakers, his soldiers and civil servants committed serious offenses. No one dared speak of their exactions to him. At the time a *baqqāl-bāzī* troupe was due to perform before the king; the company had the courage to act out the king’s officers’ and tax collectors’ misdeeds. After the performance, the king had all those who were wrongly arrested released and rehabilitated. Ḥosayn Khan is of the opinion that the dialogues carried on by the actors in Isfahan, who were in fact pious people, were worth recording. Most of these people emigrated to Tehran and other cities.

Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah (r. 1264-1313/1848-96) was interested in Iranian traditional theater (both passion plays, *ta’zīa*, and improvised comedy). He maintained several skillful court jesters, among whom was the well-known Karīm Šīra‘ī. A play called *Baqqāl-bāzī dar ḥozūr* (*baqqāl-bāzī* in the presence [of the king]; text in B. Mo’menī, *Tīātr-e Karīm Šīra‘ī* and J. Malekpūr, I, pp. 279-301) has been wrongly attributed to Karīm Šīra‘ī, who could not have written it because, despite the buffoon’s relative freedom and the king’s appreciation of the way he would ridicule some of his courtiers and statesmen, he could not tolerate the use of such strong language or social criticism (especially when directed at the royal family) at court. The play was probably written around 1872-73 by a liberal-minded opponent of the king and his rule; parts of it could have been added during the following 20 years. This unique text (with its characters like *čordakī*, *reškī*, and *māstī*) contains, however, valuable information on the genre’s acting, costumes, makeup, and props. The other famous entertainer



under Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah was Esmā'īl Bazzāz, a draper by trade, who in his performances changed the *baqqāl* (grocer) of the traditional plays into other characters such as a court physician, a colonel, and even the Tehran chief of police in 1300/1883, the last mentioned of whom reacted angrily and had the performer beaten. The comedian was avenged, however, after he complained of his punishment to the shah (E'temād-al-Salṭana, p. 231). Esmā'īl Bazzāz retired in 1310/1892 (idem, p. 836, and Bektāš, p. 37).

M. Rezvani reports having seen *baqqāl-bāzī* in the early 1920s in the Caucasus and in Iran (pp. 112-14). In Azarbaijan it was called *bagkal-oyunu*, and one of its characters used a stick (*čomāq*), similar to Arlecchino's bat in the Commedia dell'Arte, to beat people. Rezvani recalls a play he saw at Astarābād in 1923, called *Nowrūz-'Alī* after the grocer's servant, whose prodigious laziness provided the comedic material of the play.

Baqqāl-bāzī has contributed an idiom to colloquial Persian: *baqqāl-bāzī dar āvardan* "to make a scandal." Other forms of Persian comedy are called: *kačalak-bāzī*, *maškara-bāzī*, *rūḥawzī*, *sīāh-bāzī*, *taḳta-ḥawzī*, *tamāšā*, *taqlīd*.

See also [dalqak](#).

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