



## DRAMA

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**DRAMA**, in formal Western terms a relatively new art form in Persia, though various types of dramatic performance, including religious plays and humorous satirical skits, have long been a part of Persian religious and folk tradition. *Ta'ziya* is a form of Persian religious drama that developed in the 16th century and commemorates the suffering of Shi'ite martyrs; it is usually presented in verse and is the only traditional form of Persian drama in which written texts are used (Yarshater, 1979). Traditional comic entertainments are usually presented on special occasions like weddings; they include *baqqāl-bāzī*, *rūhawẓmī* or *takt-ḥawẓī* (usually performed over a courtyard pool covered with boards to make a stage), *sīāh-bāzī* (in which the central comedian appears in blackface), *kīāl-bāzī* (shadow play), *ḳayma-šab-bāzī* (marionette show), and *'arūsak-bāzī* or *'arūsak-e pošt-e parda* (puppet show). Most of these plays have stock characters and involve domestic quarrels, lovers' conflicts, and relations between rich and poor. Traditionally they were not written down. Professional performers followed standard plots, improvising the dialogue from performance to performance. These performances were often used as vehicles for social criticism, particularly of high officials, the rich, and clerics (Beyzā'ī, 1344 Š./1965a, pp. 175-98; Malekpūr, I, pp. 269-78; see [COFFEEHOUSE](#); [DALQAK](#)).

Despite government censorship, religious restrictions, and public infatuation with newer forms of entertainment (Kapusinski, 1988; Ghanoonparvar and Green, p. x) both traditional religious drama and comedies have continued to evolve to the present day, and modern Persian dramatists have drawn on



them for their own works.

*Beginnings of Persian drama.* Modern Persian drama had its beginnings in the 19th century, when educated Persians became acquainted with Western theater. Students sent to Europe to acquire knowledge of Western technology returned with a taste for other aspects of Western culture, including theater. Initially Western plays were translated into Persian and performed for the royal family and courtiers in the first Western-style theater in Persia, on the site of the later [Dār al-fonūn](#). Molière's *Le misanthrope* was the first of them, translated as *Gozāreš-e mardomgorīz* by Mīrzā Ḥabīb Ešfahānī (Istanbul, 1286/1869) with much liberty taken in the rendering of the characters' names and personalities, so that the play was more Persian than French (Browne, *Lit. Hist. Persia* IV, pp. 327-28).

In addition to direct adaptations, Persian drama was also indirectly influenced by Western theater through the works of the reform-minded civil servant and writer [Mīrzā Faḥr-ʿAlī Ākūndzāda](#), whose plays, written in Azeri Turkish and published in a newspaper in the Caucasus in 1851-56 (tr. M. J. Qarāčadāgī as *Tamṭīlāt* "The comedies," Tehran, 1349 Š./1970; Malekpūr, I, pp. 136-37), stimulated [Mīrzā Āqā Tabrīzī](#) to try his hand at writing plays in Persian. Three of Tabrīzī's four plays, written in the 1870s, were initially published erroneously under the name of Mīrzā Malkom Khan Nāẓem-al-Dawla in Berlin in 1301 Š./1922; later all four were published under the title *Čahār tīātr* (Four plays) in Tabrīz (ed. M.-B. Mo'menī, 1355 Š./1976). They deal essentially with government corruption and other social ills. In *Sargodašt-e Ašraf Kān* (The story of Ašraf Khan) Tabrīzī focused on the practice of bribery in the Qajar government. The protagonist is obliged to pay bribes to every official, from the king down to the groom, in order to continue in his post as governor of Kūzestān, where he expects to be able to extort a great deal more from his subjects. In *Ṭarīqa-ye ḥokūmat-e Zamān Kān-e Borūjerdī* (The method of government of Zamān Khan Borūjerdī) Tabrīzī examined the manner in which local governors coerced the people into paying bribes, and in *Ḥekāyat-e Karbalā' raftan-e Šāhqolī Mīrzā* (The story of Šāhqolī Mīrzā's pilgrimage to Karbalā') he addressed the family relationships of the Qajar rulers, also governed by greed and extortion. Finally, in *Ḥekāyat-e ʿāšeḡ šodan-e Āqā Hāšem* (The story of Āqā Hāšem's falling in love) he attacked the importance placed on wealth and the prevalence of superstitious beliefs and practices like fortune-telling.

These plays are not entirely successful, owing to Tabrīzī's unfamiliarity with



the formal aspects of Western drama; although some have been staged in recent decades, they remain important primarily to historians of Persian drama. In particular their themes are significant, comparable to those embodied in contemporary fiction and poetry. Indeed, Persian drama has remained primarily a vehicle of social criticism since these early attempts, though later playwrights created more sophisticated and experimental works.

From these initial attempts interest in Western-style drama began to grow in Persia in the later decades of Qajar rule. A national theater was established in Tehran in 1329/1911, and a number of playwrights began experimenting with musical comedies and dramas in verse. Among the most prominent were Mortazāqolī Khan Fekrī Eršād Mo'ayyad-al-Mamālek (1288-1337/1868-1917), who wrote five plays: *Sīrūs-e kabīr* (Cyrus the Great; Tehran, 1332/1914), *Sargodašt-e yek rūz-nāmanegār* (The story of a journalist; Tehran, 1332/1914), *Ešq-e pīrī* (Love in old age; Tehran, 1332/1914), *Ḥokkām-e qadīm, ḥokkām-e jadīd* (Old rulers, new rulers; Tehran, 1334/1916), and *Se rūz dar māliya* (Three days in the department of finance; Tehran, 1334/1916). Although Fekrī Eršād's plays are technically superior to those of Tabrīzī, they are focused on similar themes. For example, in *Ḥokkām-e qadīm, ḥokkām-e jadīd* he dealt with government corruption after the [Constitutional Revolution](#) in ways reminiscent of *Sargodašt-e Ašraf Kān*. Other contemporary playwrights included Aḥmad Maḥmūdī Kamāl-al-Wezāra (1292-1349=1309 Š./1875-1930), author of *Ḥāji Rīā'ī Kān yā Tārtūf-e šarqī* (Ḥāji Rīā'ī Khan, or the oriental Tartuffe; Tehran, 1336/1918) and *Ostād Nowrūz-e pīnadūz* (Master Nowrūz the cobbler; Tehran, 1337/1919); Mīrzāda Ešqī (1272-1344=1303 Š./1893-1925), who wrote *Rastākīz-e salāṭīn-e Īrān* (The resurrection of Persian kings; Tehran, 1334/1916); and Abu'l-Ḥasan Forūgī (1301-79=1338 Š./1883-1959), author of *Šīdūš o Nāhīd* (Šīdūš and Nāhīd; Tehran, 1339/1921).

*Under the Pahlavis.* When Reżā Shah came to power in the early 1920s his efforts to westernize Persia included new support for Western-style theater. Nonetheless, the government strictly censored plays deemed critical of the regime (see [CENSORSHIP](#); [CINEMA iv](#)). Only those with historical and nationalistic themes, often glorifying pre-Islamic Persia, were supported and promoted by the government. Still, some dramatists of the period satirized the new preoccupation with the glorious Persian past and the shah's efforts to establish a modern military force. Examples include Sa'īd Nafīsī's *Ākerīn yādgār-e Nāder Šāh* (The last memento of Nāder Shah; Tehran, 1305 Š./1926), set during the war with Russia and revolving around the character of an old



soldier from Nāder Shah's army, who dwells on memories of past victories, oblivious to the passage of time and Persian defeat. Another example is Ḥasan Moqaddam's popular *Ja'far Kān az farang āmada* (Ja'far Khan has returned from Europe; Tehran, 1301 Š./1922; 2nd ed., Tehran, 1357 Š./1978), one of the earliest plays to focus on the comic confusion arising from encounters between Persian and European cultures. Moqaddam mocked the Persian penchant for superficial imitation of Westerners, on one hand, and rampant superstition and decadent ideas in Persian society, on the other. Dabīḥ Behrūz (1309-81=1350 Š./1891-1971) wrote the farce *Jījak-ʿAlīšāh* (Tehran, 1302 Š./1923), ʿAlī Naṣr (1311-81=1340 Š./1893-1962) wrote *Arūsī-e Ḥosayn Āqā* (Ḥosayn Āqā's wedding), and Šādeq Hedāyat (1321-70=1330 Š./1903-51) wrote *Parvīn doktar-e Sāsān* (Parvīn, daughter of Sāsān; Tehran, 1309 Š./1930; 2nd ed., Tehran, 1333 Š./1954), a sentimental and nationalistic play.

After Rezā Shah's abdication in 1320 Š./1941 there was a decade of relative freedom of expression. Various new political parties and groups used drama as a propaganda tool, and once again playwrights turned to sociopolitical themes. In 1326 Š./1947 ʿAbd-al-Ḥosayn Nūšīn (1280-1350 Š./1901-71), a graduate of the Conservatoire de Toulouse and an active member of the communist Tudeh party, gathered a number of professional actors to stage translations of Western dramas in Tehran. The initial success of two such plays persuaded a wealthy merchant to invest in the Ferdowsī theater, in which additional translations of Western dramas directed by Nūšīn were staged. The first production, a translation of J. B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* (*Mostanṭeq*), met with great success and was followed without interruption by other translated plays until 15 Bahman 1327 Š./ 4 February 1948, when the Tudeh party was banned and its leading members, including Nūšīn, jailed after an attempt on the shah's life. Colleagues of Nūšīn carried on his work, however, in 1330 Š./1951 by opening the Sa'dī theater, in which translations of Western plays continued to be staged with success. The Sa'dī theater was burned in the [coup d'état of 1332 Š./1953](#) and some of its actors jailed (Oskū'i, pp. 185-222). With the fall of the government of Moḥammad Moṣaddeq, martial law and strict censorship were imposed, and Persian dramatists focused their attention of necessity on artistic aspects of drama and production techniques. Even though a large number of theaters and theater groups were established in the two decades after the abdication, few critically significant plays were written in Persia, at first because of political confusion and then because of censorship. Nevertheless, this period afforded Persian playwrights and audiences the opportunity to become more acquainted with



Western theater. Instrumental in this spread was the arrival of Patrick Quinby of Bowdoin College in Maine to teach drama at the University of Tehran. Classic European plays, including examples by Ben Jonson, William Shakespeare, and Molière, and modern plays by George Bernard Shaw and Jean-Paul Sartre were translated and staged.

By the early 1960s a younger generation of playwrights had appeared on the scene, ushering in a new era in Persian drama, which lasted two decades, until the Islamic Revolution of 1357 Š./1978. Ġolām-Ĥosayn Sā'edī, Bahrām Beyzā'ī, 'Alī Naṣīrīān, Bahman Forsī, Biżan Mofīd, Esmā'īl Ķalaj, Parvīz Ṣayyād, Arsalān Pūryā, 'Abbās Na'ibandīān, Parvīz Kārdān, Sa'īd Solţānpūr, Maĥmūd Dawlatābādī, Moĥsen Yalfānī, Ebrāhīm Makkī, Nāder Ebrāhīmī, Moṣţafā Raĥīmī, Nāṣer Ṣāhīnpar, and Nāṣer Īrānī contributed to the flourishing of this art form in Persia. As a literary form drama also appealed to writers of fiction like Ṣādeq Čūbak and poets like Aĥmad Ṣāmlū. On the other hand, dramatists like Sā'edī and Beyzā'ī also wrote fiction and made films (Ghanoonparvar and Green, pp. ix-xxix; Kapuscinski, 1987, pp. 392, 397; see [CINEMA ii](#)).

Important factors in the development of Persian drama in this period were the continued translation and production of European, American, and occasionally Arab and Asian plays. They ranged from the works of classical Greek dramatists like Sophocles and Euripides to Shakespeare, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Friedrich Schiller. More significant, however, were the many modern plays by Shaw, Oscar Wilde, Henrik Ibsen, Nikolai Gogol, Anton Chekhov, Bertolt Brecht, Max Frisch, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Harold Pinter, John Osborne, Tennessee Williams, and Heinrich Böll.

This floruit of the drama reflected not only the relative novelty of the genre, with its potential for experimentation, but also the general intellectual climate in Persia, which was partly encouraged by the government of Moĥammad-Rezā Shah (1320-57 Š./1941-78). The Ministry of culture and arts (Wezārat-e farhang o honar) established an acting school; a division of dramatic arts was added to the Faculty of fine arts at Tehran University; and Persian national television sponsored a theater workshop that produced plays for television and the stage. Beginning in 1346 Š./1967 the government also sponsored the Shiraz arts festival, which became an international forum for experimental theater, attracting Western playwrights and theater groups. Nevertheless, the official attitude toward some notable Persian dramatists and their works was ambivalent. Although the government sought to promote Persian drama to



international status, it was unable to tolerate explicit or even subtle criticism of the regime; many works were strictly censored. Such measures, usually coupled with harassment and incarceration of writers, resulted in frequent bans on publication and production of such plays as *Amūzgarān* by Yalfānī and *Ḥasanak* by Soltānpūr. It was perhaps partly for this reason that Persian dramatists, like Persian poets and fiction writers, took refuge in often enigmatic symbolism (see Ghanoonparvar) that had to be decoded by the audience.

Fascinated by this situation, playwrights became even more interested in innovative techniques. Forsī represented a generation of younger playwrights who seemed to focus their work on experimentation with metaphor, symbol, and language. The language and form of his first play, *Goldān* (The vase; Tehran, 1340 Š./1961), attracted the attention of the critics. More advanced examples of this school include the work of Naʿbandiān, whose first play, *Pažūheš-ī žarf wa setorg wa now dar sangvārahā-ye dawra-ye bīst-o-panjom-e zamīn-šenāsī* (Profound, strong, and new research on the fossils of the twenty-fifth geological era; Tehran, 1347 Š./1968), which was performed at the Shiraz arts festival in 1347 Š./1968, alluded to various Persian and non-Persian traditions that even many educated Persians found difficult to decipher. Even the works of more popular playwrights like Sāʿedī, who wrote under the pseudonym Gowhar Morād, were often characterized by similar approaches. For example, in *Māh-e ʿasal* (Honeymoon; Tehran, 1355 Š./1976), an allegory in which Persia in the 1970s is presented as a police state, a newlywed couple is forced by a government agency to accept an oddly dressed old woman as a permanent guest in their apartment. Before long their personal relationship is under the absolute control of the woman and the agency she represents. Through a series of arbitrary actions and nonsensical speeches the couple has been totally brainwashed by the end of the play. Not all of Sāʿedī's plays belong to the theater of the absurd, however; in fact, despite his use of symbols to convey several levels of meaning, he is often described as a realist, probably because he set his works in everyday urban and rural situations and dealt with topical issues. He was a particular master of dialogue reflecting all walks of Persian life, which enhanced the realistic character of his work.

The works of Beyzāʿī, whose book *Nemāyeš dar Īrān*, is the definitive work on the history of Persian theater since the mid-1960s, are also characterized by language, style, and symbolism that require deciphering by a sophisticated audience. *Čahār šandūq* (Four boxes; Tehran, 1358 Š./1979), written in 1346



Š./1967, is a study of how a society manufactures its own dictators. Four characters appear on stage as four colors: yellow, green, red, and black, symbolizing intellectuals, clergy, merchants, and laborers respectively. At the beginning, in order to safeguard the interests of his own class, each contributes to the making of a scarecrow as guardian against some unknown external threat. Soon, however, the scarecrow comes to life and is able to break their alliance and force them to build four boxes, in which each is confined. This confinement is, however, self-imposed, for each character is more afraid of the others than of the despotic scarecrow. Beyzā'ī, who is also a successful filmmaker, is known for mythical and historical characters caught in ontological dilemmas. In his plays he succeeds in presenting universal philosophical ideas in fully dramatic terms. His language is poetic, in both formal and colloquial Persian; in the latter he achieves this effect by means of rapid rhythmic exchanges among characters.

Other playwrights of the period relied on more traditional forms. Beyzā'ī himself used such forms in many of his plays. Naṣīrīān, a well-known actor, writer, and director in both theater and films, relied on them extensively. His *Sīāh* (Black) and *Bongāh-e te'ātrāl. Nemāyeš-e taḳt-ḥawzī dar do baḳš*, (The theatrical agency. A *taḳt-ḥawzī* show in two parts, 1357 Š./1978) are modern adaptations of *rūḥawzī* and *taḳt-ḥawzī*. For subject matter he oftenturned to old Persian tales, as in *Bolbol-e sargašta* (The wandering nightingale; 2nd ed., Tehran, 1354 Š./1975), a reworking of a popular children's story. Nevertheless, his guiding themes were contemporary social issues, particularly the clash between traditional and newer ways of life.

Mofīd also drew on Persian tales. His *Šahr-e qeṣṣa* (City of tales; Tehran, 1348 Š./1969), perhaps the most popular of all Persian plays, was written in traditional rhythmic style that resulted in a kind of musical drama. Although it seems at first glance to have been written for children, its main audience, it is in fact a parable about contemporary sociopolitical issues. Akbar Rādī, one of the realist playwrights, set his works in Gīlān province and on the Caspian shores. The critically acclaimed *Ofūl* (The descent; Tehran, 1343 Š./1964) and *Šayyādān* (The fishermen; Tehran, 1348 Š./1969; 2nd ed., 1355 Š./1976) established his reputation. In the former he focused on the conflict between generations: A young engineer tries to introduce changes on the estate of his wealthy and old-fashioned father-in-law. In *Šayyādān* a group of fishermen rise up against a large fishing firm but are defeated. In *Marg dar pā'iz* (Death in the autumn; Tehran, 1349 Š./1970) Rādī dealt with the disintegration and



destruction of the way of life of an old farmer and his family, symbolized by the departure of the farmer's son, who fears being drafted into the army, and by the death of the farmer's only horse, which could have helped him work in his old age. Rādī's incorporation of colloquial Persian, especially the dialects of the northern provinces, may also help to preserve threatened aspects of local culture. Kāraj, whose generally realistic plays are focused on the urban poor, addicts, pimps, and prostitutes, achieved his effects with minimal dialogue. A typical play is *Pātūg* (The hangout; Tehran, 1350 Š./1971), set in a teashop in the infamous red-light district of Tehran before the Islamic Revolution. Ḥosayn, a tough, is in love with the prostitute Zarī and wishes to marry her, but she is unfaithful; at the end of the play he learns that she is having a relationship with one of his old friends. Kāraj wrote other plays on similar themes. For example, in *Goldūna Kānom* (Mrs. Goldūna; Tehran, 1350 Š./1971) he experimented with techniques perhaps inspired by the cinema. In the published editions of his plays he used a peculiar transcription of Persian in which silent letters are omitted and a single letter stands for several letters that have the same sound in Persian. They are thus difficult to read. His focus on a segment of Persian society with which most of his audience was not familiar was a form of implied social criticism.

*Under the Islamic Republic.* Political allegories and plays implicitly criticizing the Persian government and social institutions, as well as dramas dealing with the influence of alien, particularly Western, cultures and social ills like poverty, prostitution, and drug addiction, remained popular in the Persian theater until the Revolution. As government censorship and control diminished in the late 1970s and before new censorship measures were imposed after the Revolution there was a brief period during which enigmatic symbolism gave way to more direct political expression in the Persian theater, sometimes by less well-known but politically active playwrights. Maḥmūd Rahbar, in *Qānūn* (The law; Tehran, 1356 Š./1977) wrote about a prominent senator near the end of the Pahlavi period who finds himself in jail after having served the regime faithfully for many years. His dialogue with a general gave Rahbar the opportunity to expose unethical practices of the government. Another example is Farāmarz Ṭālebī's *Pādegān dar šāmgāh* (The barracks in the evening; Tehran, 1356 Š./1977); it deals with military brainwashing of simple young villagers, which turns them into killers of demonstrators. During this period Solṭānpūr wrote his popular *Abbās Āqā, kārgar-e Īrān nāsīonāl* (Abbās Āqā, worker for the Īrān nāsīonāl company), which was reportedly performed in the streets. The period of comparative



freedom of expression was very brief, however, and ended with the triumph of the Islamic Revolution; Solţānpūr was executed for leftist activities in the spring of 1360 Š./1981, and censorship was reimposed on all the Persian arts.

Even before the Islamic Revolution Persian religious authorities and devout people had strongly disapproved of Western-style theater, which, like the cinema, was regarded as sinful. Particularly among older generations few such people ever visited a theater (Malekpūr, I, p. 309). Naturally, after the Revolution many assumed that at least a temporary suspension of dramatic performances would ensue, a view seemingly confirmed by the harsh treatment of individuals connected with the performing arts and the flight abroad of many Persian playwrights, actors, and directors (Sā'edī, 1363 Š./1984). In fact, in the months before the Islamic government was able to consolidate its power a variety of literary journals and other works were published without censorship, but this freedom did not last long. With the start of the war with Iraq in 1359 Š./1980 and the growing power of the Islamic regime to impose internal controls, various official and semiofficial government agencies began to review materials written and produced for the theater. Contrary to expectations, however, the government found dramatic performances useful propaganda tools, and the expected taboo on drama never fully materialized. Nevertheless, the official attitude has been ambivalent, perhaps reflecting the continuing struggle between conservative religious groups and more liberal factions. The former have remained suspicious of modern art as a manifestation of anti-Islamic and Western cultural influence (Ashraf).

On the whole the 1980s should be considered a transitional period in Persian drama. Two factors contributed to heightening the changes in this genre beyond those in other literary forms. First, the sociopolitical content of plays was transformed, owing to alterations in the political system and, more important, a fundamental transformation in the general values and social attitudes of the Persian people. Second, in the staging of plays official attitudes on issues like dress restrictions for both men and women and the interaction between male and female performers dictated changes in playwriting itself. At the same time more conventional storytelling techniques replaced the experimentation of the 1960s and 1970s and helped to attract general audiences. Experimentation remains important in the Persian theater, however.

Postrevolutionary Persian drama can be classified in two general categories:



plays written in Persia under Islamic rule and plays written by Persians living abroad. In Persia government restrictions have promoted direct propaganda in support of the regime and its objectives, as well as mandating adherence to the new social mores. Incentives are provided by various government agencies, especially the Ministry of culture and Islamic guidance (Wezārat-e farhang o eršād-e eślāmī), that finance theater groups throughout Persia and organize theater festivals. As a result dozens of amateur and professional groups have appeared, and there are many young playwrights. In 1367 Š./1988, for instance, it was reported that the number of theatrical groups had reached 100. In January 1989 some of them presented fifty-two plays at the Fajr theater festival in Tehran (*Keyhān-e farhangī* 9, Bahman 1366 Š./February 1988; 10, Esfand 1366 Š./March 1988; 11, Bahman 1367 Š./February 1989). A number of journals and other publications regularly include reports on the theater and interviews with younger playwrights and directors.

Most dramatists continue on the course established in the 1960s and 1970s (*Ketāb-e šobḥ*, spring 1368 Š./1989; summer and fall 1368 Š./1989; see also issues of *Fašl-nāma-ye te'ātr* and *Nemāyeš*, two journals devoted to theater and drama). For example, a play by Salmān Fārsī Šāleḥzehī, *Āb, bād, kāk* (Water, wind, land; Tehran, 1368 Š./1989), written in 1366 Š./1987, deals with conflicts between peasants and landlords. It opens with a peasant uprising, but the landlords, represented as torchbearers, though driven from the villages, have not given up and return to set the wheat fields on fire. Sacrifice by the village headman and other villagers is required to protect the crops and prevent the return of the old order. This theme was not new in Persian drama, having been treated by Sā'edī and other earlier dramatists. Formally Šāleḥzehī made use of symbolic actions in several scenes that are at times reminiscent of the work of Beyzā'ī. Another example is *Šegerd-e āker* (The last technique; Tehran, 1368 Š./1989) by Ḥamīd-Rezā A'zam, written in 1365 Š./1986. It is a work of propaganda in the service of the regime and its role in the war with Iraq. The audience, however, may not recognize it as a religious play or one with Islamic overtones. A'zam chose as his protagonist a traditional *naqqāl*, who has told tales from the *Šāh-nāma* in teahouses all his life and acquired a great reputation. In the course of his career he has trained a number of apprentices. As the story unfolds through a performance by him and one of the apprentices, the audience expects to hear stories from the Persian epic tradition, particularly the battle of Rostam and Sohrāb. But the old *naqqāl*, having become aware of the heroism of the young people fighting in the war with Iraq, tells their story instead, in the traditional language of performance.



More important, he decides to experience heroism and the battlefield at first hand, the “last technique” of the title, which in effect he teaches to the younger *naqqāl* and the audience.

Among playwrights who had already gained a reputation before the Revolution and remained active under Islamic rule, Beyzā'ī and Rādī are the most prominent. Beyzā'ī, still a prolific playwright, director, and filmmaker, wrote and produced *Marg-eYazdegerd* (The death of Yazdegerd) in 1358 Š./1979). The play is his deconstruction and reconstruction of the murder of Yazdegerd III by a miller in 651, revealing a thematic parallel between the shah's departure from Persia and the story of the last Sasanian king, who escaped from his capital in hopes of raising an army to return and fight the Arab invaders of Persia. More directly topical is Rādī's *Āhesta bā gol-e sorkò* (Slowly with the rose), produced in 1367 Š./1988 (Tehran, 1368 Š./1989). It is a psychological and sociological study of a Persian family, focusing on the different value systems underlying the imminent external and internal changes in Persian society. Another noteworthy play is *Man be bāg-e 'erfān* (I to the garden of mysticism) by Parī Šāberī, highlighting the mystical dimensions of the life and work of the poet Sohrāb Sepehrī (1307-59 Š./1928-80). It was staged in an abstract form with dance and music and received negative reviews from critics in Persia, but it was a significant box-office success, owing to public interest in Sepehrī.

Although restrictions on expression of antiestablishment sentiments and themes that do not conform to the religious and revolutionary guidelines laid down by the Islamic government have promoted a kind of Persian propaganda theater, the absence of such restrictions outside Persia has resulted in quite another sort of propaganda theater. Persian dramatists have continued to write in exile, particularly in Europe and the United States. The most renowned among them is Sā'edī, who until his death in 1364 Š./1985 continued to write prolifically and published a number of plays, beside contributing articles and short stories to the journal *Alefbā*, which he published in France. His best-known plays written in exile are *Pardadārān-e ā'īna-afroz* (The mirror-polishing storytellers) and *Otello dar sarzamīn-e 'ajāyeb* (Othello in wonderland), published posthumously in a single volume (Paris, 1364 Š./1986). The first is an antiwar play in which Sā'edī also made use of the *naqqālī* tradition. It is performed by three *pardadārs* (storytellers) with large canvases on which scenes from the war with Iraq are depicted; various portions of the canvases are lit in turn to accompany the narrations. In the first act two



*pardadārs* tell the general story of modern warfare and destruction; in the second, a black comedy, the third tells of two families whose sons are martyred in the fighting with Iraq. Although the tone is satirical, the antiwar message is clear throughout. *Otello dar sarzamīn-e 'ajāyeb* is even more satirical. Sā'edī took advantage of the Islamic regime's stated support for the arts, particularly the theater, to create a farce about the production of Shakespeare's *Othello* in Persia, where it is transformed into a propaganda tool for the revolutionary government and its opposition to the superpowers. Under official supervision and watched by a revolutionary guard armed with a machine gun, the director and actors are forced to transform the character of Othello into a revolutionary fighter representing the downtrodden and Iago into a counterrevolutionary. Even Shakespeare, sometimes called Brother Shakespeare and confused by the official in charge with the character of Othello in the play, is thought to have been a Muslim who lived, anachronistically, in pre-Islamic times. The government agents also force the female actors to cover themselves from head to foot in full Islamic dress and even object to Othello's speaking affectionately to Desdemona.

A second well-known figure in the Persian theater in exile is Şayyād, who, in addition to his very active role in the production of several films, has also written and staged a number of plays in the United States, including *Moḥākama-ye sīnemā Reks* (The Rex cinema trial) and *Ākar* (Jackass). The former deals with the deaths of about 400 people in a fire at the Rex cinema in Ābādān in 1356 Š./1977 and the question of who was responsible for the arson. In the staged trial of several officials of the shah's regime, accused by the new Islamic government of the crime, Şayyād presents a skeptical view of justice in Islamic Persia, intimating that the actual perpetrators of the crime are the judges and prosecutors in a farcical kangaroo court. *Ākar* deals with the issue of imposed conformity in Persian society; the actors wear masks to represent this conformity. At the end of the play some of the characters reject uniformity of thought, but all turn into jackasses with no consciousness even of their own metamorphosis.

Yalfānī has published a number of plays in France in recent years. He is essentially interested in psychological states and underlying tensions in relationships between individuals and chooses for his characters mainly young Persian revolutionaries. He generally begins with a stereotypical revolutionary and then focuses on him as an individual, providing the audience with a subtler view and an opportunity for self-examination, both as



revolutionaries and as human beings. In *Molāqāt* (Visit; Paris, 1369 Š./1990), written in 1358 Š./1979, a husband and wife who appear to be truly in love reveal when she visits him in jail that their commitment to their cause is more important to them than their relationship. *Qawītar az šab* (Stronger than the night; Paris, 1369 Š./1990), set in the Islamic Republic, is about a group of revolutionaries in a “safe house”; for some of them being revolutionaries has become a way of life, justifying even their escape into exile, while others are simply caught in a web from which they are trying to free themselves. In *Bonbast* (Dead end; Paris, 1369 Š./1990) a former revolutionary, who has broken with the cause in order to live a normal life, comes to the realization that he will suffer from hallucinations and guilt for the rest of his life.

From this brief survey of modern Persian drama some general conclusions can be drawn. As in the immediate prerevolutionary period, the themes of Persian drama continue to be predominantly sociopolitical. In prerevolutionary Persia antiestablishment art became an unofficial institution, often tolerated by the regime if the message was not openly stated, but in the 1980s sociopolitical concerns were more overt, perhaps because most plays published and staged in Persia must receive a seal of approval from the Islamic regime and in some way further its ideology. At the same time Persian drama in exile is often overtly political because playwrights are free from government censorship. Since the Islamic Revolution plays written both in Persia and abroad have been affected by the religious attitudes and terminology of the regime. Playwrights working in Persia must consciously practice self-censorship and restrict their work in terms of the dress, actions, and appearance of their characters, in order to receive permission for performance.

See also THEATER; articles on individual dramatists.

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