



# ḤOSAYN B. 'ALI III. THE PASSION OF ḤOSAYN

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### iii. THE PASSION (TA'ZIA) OF ḤOSAYN

The *ta'zia* (literally “mourning”) is a dramatic form which Shi'ite Muslims in Persia have created to commemorate the tragedy of Ḥosayn ebn 'Ali, and thus it is comparable to the Christian passion play. It is the only significant drama that developed in the Islamic world before contemporary theater, which was introduced there along with many other Western influences in the mid-19th century. The *ta'zia* emerged as an original dramatic form out of stationary and ambulatory mourning rituals that had become established as part of the commemoration of Ḥosayn's martyrdom at Karbalā' in the month of Moḥarram (see [ḤOSAYN B. 'ALI ii. In Popular Shi'ism](#)). Once Shi'ite Islam was enforced by the Safavids as the state religion of Persia in the sixteenth century, royal patronage ensured that the Moḥarram festival would assume a central position in Persian cultural and religious identity, and thus it became a unifying force for the nation. When the stationary and ambulatory aspects of the ritual merged in the mid-18th century, *ta'zia* was born as a distinct type of musical drama.

Like Western passion plays, *ta'zia* dramas were originally performed outdoors at crossroads and other public places where large audiences could gather.



Performances later took place in the courtyards of inns and private homes, but eventually unique structures called *Ḥosayniyas*, or *takias*, were constructed for the specific purpose of staging the plays. Community cooperation was encouraged in the building and decoration of the *takias*, whether the funds for the enterprise were provided by an individual philanthropist or by contributions from the residents of its particular locality. The *takias* varied in size, from intimate structures which could only accommodate a few dozen spectators to large buildings capable of holding an audience of more than a thousand people. Often the *takias* were temporary, having been erected specially for the observance of the Moḥarram festival. During this festival period, the *takias* were lavishly decorated with the prized possessions of the local community. Refreshments were prepared by women and served to the spectators by the children of affluent families. *Takia-ye Dawlat*, the Royal Theater in Tehran, was the most famous of all the *ta'zia* performance spaces. Built in the 1870s by Nāṣer-al-Din Shah, the Royal Theater's sumptuous magnificence surpassed that of Europe's greatest opera houses in the opinion of many Western visitors.

In contrast to the richness of the theater decoration, *ta'zia* stage décor and props are quite stark. All *takias*, regardless of their size, are constructed as theaters-in-the-round to intensify the dynamic between actors and audience: the spectators are literally surrounded by the action and often become physical participants in the play (in unwallied *takias*, it is not unusual for combat scenes to occur behind the audience).

The main drama occurs on a raised, curtainless platform in the center of a building or courtyard. Subplots and battles take place in a sand-covered, circular band of space around the stage. Actors frequently jump off the stage into this space to mark the passage of time or a journey, and scene changes are indicated when a performer circles the platform. If there are auxiliary stages that extend into the audience, they serve as settings for scenes of special significance. Corridors running from the stage through the seating area serve as passageways for troops, messengers, and animals. The starkness of the stage represents the barrenness of the desert plain at Karbalā'. Props are few and largely symbolic: the Euphrates River is denoted by a basin of water; a tree branch indicates a grove of palms. More utilitarian props, such as chairs or bedding and cooking utensils, are carried onstage by the actors, or even by members of the audience.

Costumes are also meant to be representational. Although fabulously elegant



stage attire was common at the Royal Ta'zia Theater during the reign of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah, there was no attempt to make the actors' garments historically accurate. The main goal of costume design was to help the spectators identify a character and his nature by his clothing. This practice has continued, with certain characters adopting the prevailing fashions of their own time for their particular roles. Thus, an actor in Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's era playing a 7th-century Western ambassador wore a frock coat—the standard diplomatic outfit of the 19th century; since World War II, the same ambassador could be seen wearing a British military uniform. Performers in women's parts wear baggy black garments which cover them from head to toe. Since female roles are played by men, the voluminous robes and veils serve to conceal this fact. Additional clues to a character's identity can be discerned through various accessories, in that sometimes a learned character wears reading glasses, while a villain appears in sunglasses (reflecting perhaps the worldwide influence of American gangster films). Color symbolism further helps the audience to recognize different dramatic personalities and situations. When a white cloth is put on a protagonist's shoulders or he dons a white shirt, it is understood to represent a shroud, thus indicating to the audience that he will soon be martyred.

An even more obvious indication of a character's disposition is apparent in the way that he delivers his dialogue: in the *ta'zia*, protagonists sing, while antagonists recite. Dressed in red to symbolize blood and oppression, villains also often purposely overact by shrieking their lines in harsh, unpleasant voices. By contrast, the heroes sing their parts in the classical Persian modes and clothe themselves in the green color of the garden paradise. Traditionally, actors are chosen for their physical attributes. Protagonists playing Ḥosayn, for example, are expected to be tall with broad shoulders and fine beards. This sometimes leads to casting problems, however, since a fine singing voice is necessary to complement the strong physique of a hero. Young boys with good vocal skills, who begin to act by playing girls' roles in the *ta'zia*, would therefore often assume the parts of heroic young men after their voices break. If a young actor does not attain the stature deemed appropriate for a heroic part or if his voice retains a feminine quality, he will continue to play one of the female characters.

Singers are accompanied by a variety of drums, trumpets, flutes, and cymbals. An orchestra can be quite substantial or consist of just a few musicians, depending on the financial resources or theatrical experience of the troupe.



Drum music announces that the drama is about to begin. It may be repeated several times, particularly if the audience needs more time to assemble. Once the spectators have gathered, a fanfare is played as the actors file into the performance area in procession. This is followed by a short overture, which sets the mood for the play about to be performed. The drama opens with the *piš-kvāni*, or prologue, which presents a summary of the plot sung by the chorus. During the *piš-kvāni* everybody sings, including the antagonists. The chorus usually assembles in the main performance space, but it occasionally divides into two groups on either side of this area and sings alternate lines in antiphony (“call and response”). Throughout the play, programmatic instrumental music alternates with singing. These musical intervals set the mood or advance the action by indicating the passage of time. They also serve to cue a singer by establishing the particular *dast-gāh*, or mode, in which he is about to perform. He will then sing the scene *a cappella*.

According to many scholars of music, it is thanks to the *ta'zia* that much of the classical Persian repertoire has survived. But just as Western influences are evident in *ta'zia* costumes, they are also prominent in the musical elements of the drama. During the zenith of the *ta'zia* in the latter part of the 19th century, the first polytechnic college, called *Dār al-fonun* (q.v.), was founded in Iran and staffed by foreign instructors. The curriculum consisted largely of military subjects, which included band music. Eventually, quite a number of these marches found their way into the repertory of the *takia* theaters.

It is the responsibility of the *ta'zia* director to supervise the music and assemble an orchestra. In addition, he acts as the producer, stage manager, prompter, public relations man, and financial director. He is truly a “Renaissance man” of the theater, not only supervising the drama itself, but also making the necessary arrangements with the local authorities and accounting for the financial returns. Always onstage during a performance, the director makes sure that the production runs smoothly and oversees the interaction of actors, musicians, and audience. His ubiquitous presence is not distracting to the spectators, as he is seen as an integral part of the *ta'zia* drama.

In his role as prompter, the director cues actors and helps children and inexperienced players with their lines. In the past, actors used to read their lines from crib sheets held in their palms, indicating that they were merely role-carriers with no personal connections to the characters they portrayed. Today most performers learn their roles by heart (if they don't, they refrain



from conspicuously referring to their notes). While traditionally the director was responsible for eliciting strong emotions of grief and sadness from the audience by the manner in which the production was staged, it is today more the responsibility of the actors to provide a cathartic experience for the spectators. Influenced heavily by the realistic acting of modern film and television, *ta'zia* actors no longer distance themselves from the characters that they are playing, but throw themselves wholeheartedly into their roles. Often the performers identify so strongly with their parts that they are swept away by their situations. In turn, the audience is caught up in an atmosphere of genuinely powerful emotions.

The plays devoted to the tragedy at Karbalā' and its surrounding events form the core of the *ta'zia* repertory. Although the massacre of Ḥosayn and his followers historically took place on one day, the tenth of Moḥarram, the battle is divided into many different episodes performed on separate days. The only fixed play in the Moḥarram repertory is the martyrdom of Ḥosayn on the tenth, or *Āšurā* (q.v.); others can be performed in varying sequences. Usually, the cycle begins on the first day of Moḥarram with a play commemorating the death of Ḥosayn's emissary to Kufa, Moslem b. 'Aqil. This is followed by a daily progression of plays, each devoted to the martyrdom of different members of Ḥosayn's family or his companions. In these dramas, a hero takes on the entire enemy force unassisted, while the remaining protagonists gather on the central stage to reflect on their fate and deliver comments of a philosophical and religious nature. Each play contributes to the gradually increasing emotional build-up in anticipation of the supreme sacrifice of Ḥosayn, the "Prince of Martyrs." Ḥosayn's death does not always conclude the essential *ta'zia* repertory. Performances may continue after *Āšurā* to depict the sorrowful destiny of the female members of Ḥosayn's family, who were taken as captives to Damascus.

Over time, new plays that depicted the sacrifices of Shi'ite martyrs before and after the massacre at Karbalā' were added to the *ta'zia* collection. Based on the Qur'ān, the Hadith, legends, and current events, these productions provided an opportunity to extend the performance of *ta'zia* dramas throughout the year. Even these non-Moḥarram plays, however, retain a connection to the tragedy at Karbalā' through a dramatic device known as *goriz*, or digression. Within a particular play, the *goriz* may be a direct verbal reference to Ḥosayn's martyrdom, or a brief scene depicting an aspect of his tragedy, or both. Through the *goriz*, all *ta'zia* drama expands beyond spatial and time



constraints to merge the past and the present into one unifying moment of intensity, thus enabling the spectators to feel they are simultaneously in the performance space and at Karbalā'.

The number of *ta'zia* scripts is vast with new productions and local variations of established dramas constantly being added to the canon. The Cerulli collection at the Vatican Library contains over 1,055 *ta'zia* manuscripts. It is important to note that *ta'zia* scripts are rarely intended for reading, but solely for performing. Each part is written on narrow sheets of paper which the actor can hold in the palm of his hand. The theatrical context of the script, in conjunction with the setting, costumes, action, and musical and verbal elements, provides the standard for judging its value.

There is an amateur Moḥarram *ta'zia* tradition which exists alongside that of the professional *ta'zia* dramatic companies. Typically, a production of this kind is organized by a former professional *ta'zia* actor, who brings together the residents of a district to perform together for purely religious reasons. The dramatization of the death of Ḥosayn gives the participants an opportunity to exhibit their own sorrows and desires, as an expression of their faith, within an archetypal setting. Professional *ta'zia* productions today are usually commercial enterprises—fundamental social and political changes in Iran during the 20th century abolished the practice of artistic patronage on the individual and communal level such as had flourished in the past. In the 1930s, restrictions imposed by the government forced *ta'zia* performances to move from towns to rural areas. At present, professional troupes are often family-run businesses that move from place to place every two weeks, performing a different play every day and occasionally giving performances both in the afternoon and evening.

In the last fifty years or so, Europeans and Americans have traveled to Asia to experience the bond between actor and audience that is one of the hallmarks of the Eastern dramatic tradition. The most common destinations have been India and the Far East; but in the late 1960s Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and Tadeusz Kantor discovered *ta'zia*. Brook, in particular, was profoundly impacted by the dramatic possibilities of the Persian form. He explained: "I saw in a remote Iranian village one of the strongest things I have ever seen in theatre: a group of 400 villagers, the entire population of the place, sitting under the tree and passing from roars of laughter to outright sobbing—although they knew perfectly well the end of the story—as they saw Ḥosayn in danger of being killed, and then fooling his enemies, and then being



martyred. And when he was martyred, the theatre form became truth” (Brook, p. 52). Brook went on to prove that Iranian dramatic conventions and cultural themes could be effectively transposed to the Western stage with his successful adaptation of a 12th-century mystical poem, *The Conference of the Birds*, as a theatrical play.

Jerzy Grotowski also borrowed from the *ta'zia* tradition to fuse dramatic action with ritual as a means of uniting actor and audience. However, his productions for the Laboratory Theater carefully controlled the dynamic between the players and the spectators by imposing limits on space, audience size, and seating placement. *Ta'zia*, in contrast, retains a fundamental principle of intimacy without placing any constraints on the size of the performance space or the number of spectators. This is *le théâtre total*. In the words of Benjamin, the first American envoy to Iran, “*Ta'zia* is an interesting exhibition of the dramatic genius of the Persian race.”

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[Figure 1.](#) Šemr, the arch villain in a processional *ta'zia*, Mehriz, 1977.

[Figure 2.](#) *Parda-ye ta'zia*, representing the tragedy of Karbalā.



Figure 3. ‘Āšurā, oil painting by Muḥammad Modabber, 1960s.

Figure 4. Ta‘zia, “Bāzār-e Šām,” Takiya-ye Mo‘āwen-al-Molk, Kermānšāh, 1999.

Figure 5. A Moḥarram penitent, after B. Vereschquine, *Voyage dans les Provinces de Caucase*, Paris, 1869.

Figure 6. A tile panel illustrating self-flagellation, Takiya-ye Mo‘āwen-al-Molk, Kermānšāh.