



PIŠ-PARDA

PIŠ-PARDA (lit. in front of the curtain), a short comedy sketch, musical number, or dance performed before the main theatrical performance, or in an intermission between acts of a performance. The term appears to be of some antiquity, predating Western cultural contact with Iran, but carrying over into modern times.

Popular entertainment has been an active part of Iranian life since pre-Islamic times, although documentation is extremely sparse before the 19th Century. The geographical and historical sources of the few attested entertainment forms for earlier periods are varied. During the [Safavid](#) period (1501-1722), the Iranian cultural sphere extended from India to the border of the Ottoman Empire. In particular, Armenian and Indian entertainers were introduced to the court, performing theater and dance that was widespread throughout South, Southwest, and Central Asia, forms of which survive in all these regions today using a panoply of similar names such as *maskara* (farce), *tamāšā* (show or spectacle), and *taqlid* (imitation, mime). Bahrām Beyzā'i and Georges Goyan attest to these court entertainments, consisting of dance, mime and a farcical piece called *qahr o āšti* (estrangement and reconciliation). These short pieces were identified as “curtain raisers” (*piš-parda*). These court entertainments were mirrored in popular improvisatory theater forms, known colloquially today as *ruḥawzi* or *takt ḥawzi* theater. The same short sketches, dances, and comic episodes were included in the *ruḥawzi* performances commissioned for weddings and other celebrations (Beeman, 1981a; 1981b).

Modern European theater was introduced into Iran during the 19th Century



through Armenia and Azarbaijan. *Mirzā Fath-‘Ali Āḳundzāda*, the translator for the Russian governor of the Caucasus, wrote six comic dramas published in 1858 in Russian and 1859 in Azari Turkish. Although no performance of these plays is registered in Iran at this time, Āḳundzāda’s work was later influential on Iranian theater. The first Western-style drama in Iran was presented by a group of Armenian actors in Tabriz and Tehran between 1877 and 1879 (Floor, pp. 214, 239). The court was also interested in fostering [drama](#). After his first trip to Europe in 1873, Nāṣer-al-Din Shah (r. 1848-96) ordered a new theater hall, called Takya Dawlat (the state theater), to be built in Tehran which was inaugurated near the Shah’s summer palace at Niāvarān in September 1856 (Clamard, p. 220), and plays to be translated and performed (Šahri, V, pp. 479-80; The first Takya Dawlat was built in 1868, Amanat, p. 435). These continued as court activities for some years. Slowly, original plays in Persian were produced, many of which were deeply influenced by earlier folk forms.

After the [Constitutional Revolution](#) of 1906, theatrical performances gradually were established throughout Iran, but they mostly remained impromptu affairs acted by amateurs, often to benefit a charitable institution. Nevertheless, by the mid-1930s an important venue for performance had been established in Lālazār Street in Tehran, where several theaters were established by the mid-1930’s, surviving to the time of the Revolution of 1979. In the 1950s, when cinema and television began to erode audiences, the Lālazār theaters began to enhance their shows with musical performances, comedy acts, and female dancing, and these are properly known as *piš-parda* or curtain raisers.

These informal acts were in no way new. They had been an introductory feature of virtually all theatrical performance from before the advent of Western-style theater. The comedy was inspired by the *ruḥawzi* tradition, as well as the music. This continued to be one of the ways in which modern and traditional theater forms were combined in the popular Iranian consciousness.

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