



RUḤAWẒI

RUḤAWẒI, a comic type of traditional folk musical drama in Iran, often characterized by improvised funny remarks with social and/or cultural overtones and usually performed by professionals at ceremonies and festivities such as wedding and [circumcision](#) celebrations. It was traditionally performed on boards that were placed on the top of a small pool (*ḥawẓ*) in the courtyard and covered with rugs, thus serving as the stage, hence the designation *ruḥawẓi* (lit. [done] on the top of the pool). The origins of comic improvisatory theatre in Iran are even more obscure than those of passion plays (*ta'zia*). If *ta'zia* attracted only the casual attention of travelers and historical commentators, comic theatrical traditions were almost completely ignored. It is only through the barest of clues that we can piece together a few guesses at their history.

One way to get information is to compare the theatrical traditions of Iran today with others of a similar nature in Europe and Asia. The distribution of comic improvisatory theatrical forms similar to those in Iran today is extremely wide, ranging from Indonesia (*ludruk*) and Malaysia (*boria*) to India, Afghanistan, and Turkey (see Brandon; Peacock; for India, see Awasthi, 1971, 1972, 1975, 1979; Gargi, 1967; Mathur, 1964; Parmar; for Afghanistan, see Baghban, 1977; for Turkey, see And, 1964). It seems likely that there is a connection between all of these forms and both *commedia dell'arte* of the late Italian Renaissance and northern European comic carnival plays based on similarity of performance themes, character types, costumes, and performance conventions.



The extremely wide distribution of these comic forms at least leaves the possibility open that they share a single origin of great antiquity. The connection between Iranian performance and the performance forms of India has been suggested many times, and several historical accounts exist of migrations of musicians and dancers from India. Sekandar Amān Allāhi cites numerous historical sources documenting the migration of gypsies across Iran during the Sasanian period, and he also quotes the well-known passage from [Ferdowsi's](#) *Šāh-nāma*, in which the Sasanian king, [Bahrām V Gōr](#), asked the king of India to send ten thousand gypsy (*luri*) men and women master lute players to Iran (pp. 10-16; *Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, ed., VII, pp. 451-52; see [Gōsān](#)).

The principal historical reports of performers in Iran entertaining in a comic mode occur in general accounts of court life down through the centuries. The Sasanian king, [Kosrow II](#), is said to have supported actors (Jannati 'Aṭā'i, p. 16). Writers in the years following the Islamic conquest of Iran provide very little material on this subject, but the reign of the [Safavid](#), Shah 'Abbās I (r. 1588-1629) marks a resurgence of information about popular performers. A miniature painting by Solṭān-Mohammad Naqqāš from this period (1621) shows performers entertaining in what seems to be a court setting. One of the clowns ([Dalqak](#)) wears a tall hat, and others are clothed in goatskins (see Beyzā'i, pp. 53, 55; this miniature and many others are discussed extensively by Richard Ettinghausen (p. 218 and pls. III-V) along with a large number of fine photographic reproductions of depictions of entertainers throughout the Middle East.

According to Bahrām Beyzā'i, musicians from this period used to give comic performances when called on to entertain in the court and the homes of the wealthy. These programs consisted of several dances. One or two stories produced in dance form (one in particular known as *qahr o āšti*, "estrangement and reconciliation") are known to us, and one or two short *piš-parda* "curtain raisers" in which a dialogue in question and answer format (sometimes romantic, sometimes humorous) were presented in song. As these "curtain raisers" became more elaborate, they took the form of short humorous stories in song with two or three performers. These stories usually ended with the characters beating each other followed by a chase. Itinerant performers, because of their intimate acquaintance with the desires of the people, may have taken on this story form sooner. The humor of these performers was much freer than that of the performers who entertained in the homes of the wealthy, who were bound to protect the dignity of the



gathering (Beyzā'i, pp. 53-4).

Taqlid (imitation, mimicry), which soon began to be found in the humorous presentations of the itinerant entertainers, had much longer stories and a distinct singing aspect. Songs were sometimes sung separately during parts of the performance, where they were appropriate, but the dialogue was not sung. The number of performers was the same, but since the dialogue was not sung, the story was much freer. Entertainers in *taqlid*, called *moqalled* (mimic), would normally imitate the accents and personal characteristics of well-known people in the towns and villages in which they performed. These people would be seen meeting and greeting each other. After a short while they would fall to arguing and making fun of each other's accents and behavior, and the story would end with the two characters fighting and chasing each other (Beyzā'i, p. 168). 'Ayn-al-Saltāna Qahramān Mirzā (pp. 920-22) describes a thirteen-year old girl called Zahrā Qomi, who was considered the best dancer in town and an expert mimic. [Edward Brown](#) (p. 321) mentions "an admirable mimic" who was especially skillful in mimicking Europeans ("Firangi Šāhib") and "the Muḥammedan Mullā".

The *taqlid* form is in all essentials the same basic improvisatory comic theatrical form seen in Iran today. Comic performance continued to be a feature of the court during Qajar times. The most famous of the Qajar court clowns was Karim, whose sobriquet Šira'i referred to *šira*, "molasses," (and not, as some have thought, to narcotic *šira*, obtained from the residue of burned opium), a clown in the court of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah Qājār (r.1848-96). Karim Šira'i was not only the personal jester to Nāṣer-al-Din Shah, but also personally responsible for all court entertainment. Some of his own productions were truly elaborate, and although only one of his productions has been recorded for us to see today, from accounts of his contemporaries, it seems that he was highly thought of as a truly gifted comedian and clown. Many jokes and witticisms are attributed to him (Mostawfi, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī* I, pp. 359-61; cf. Dehḳodā; cf. Nurbakš, pp. 53-371).

Perhaps the most important point to note concerning Karim Šira'i is the degree to which he was allowed to satirize the court and its officials. In this regard he carried on the tradition of ridicule that Beyzā'i (pp. 177-78) speculates to have existed in the earlier *taqlid* form. This license to deal humorously with members of the court seems to have given Karim Šira'i a degree of power and influence, also allowing him to receive "presents" from members of the court to be spared from his wit.



The single example we have of Karim Šira'ī's comic wit in dramatic form is the play, *Baqqāl-bāzi dar ḥożur* (Grocer play in the [royal] presence; see [Baqqāl-Bāzi](#)), printed in a slightly expurgated version by Jannati 'Aṭā'ī (pp. 30-50). The original text reportedly comes from a 19th-century handwritten manuscript now reputed to be in the United States (Jannati 'Aṭā'ī, p. 19). An example from a speech in the play itself will serve to illustrate the liberty allowed Karim Šira'ī:

Go away you miserable beggar, don't you see that you can't trust anyone in the world! Ḥāji Mirzā Bey, the poor man, died and left an inheritance of 80,000 tomans. Every person of influence made all sorts of excuses, and finally stole every bit of the money. They first took the 10,000 tomans that was to be spent for the funeral. The minister of science and trade took 2,000 tomans for his own wife, and finished it buying her clothes and baubles. The rest was taken by Mirzā 'Isā Wazir to buy land the size of a whole city quarter in order to build a hospital. They built a wall around the land, and the minister, the architect, and the contractor split the rest of the money. Now the "hospital" is a meeting ground for dogs, and Ḥāji Mirzā Bey's heirs have been turned into beggars (Jannati 'Aṭā'ī, p. 40; *Baqqāl-bāzi dar ḥożur*, p. 306; Nurbakš, pp. 384-86).

Beyzā'ī (p. 177, n. 1) points out in a commentary on this text that although a script is given, it is most likely that the performance was improvisatory in nature, the performers adding whatever they thought would be appreciated at the time.

Madjid Rezvani identifies *baqqāl-bāzi* as a performance type and mentions having seen a show in [Gorgān](#) in 1923 (Rezvani, pp. 112-14). This performance was likewise improvised, but it involved the confrontation of a grocer and a clown figure in a scene, which essentially replicates many of the basic elements of *Baqqāl-bāzi dar ḥożur* mentioned above. The play ends in argumentation and a fight between the two principal characters who chase and beat each other. This basic play is still presented in various different forms throughout Iran today, and though each performing group varies the presentation, it is received very well.

Comic improvisatory theatre suffered a decline at the close of the Qajar era due to two factors: the first was the decline of the court and upper classes, who



set the tone in popular entertainment; the second was the rise of Western-style scripted theatre in the large cities of the country, particularly Tabriz, Rasht, and Tehran, which had already begun to make inroads in Iran by the late 19th century. Western-style theatre was eventually partially absorbed into the improvisatory style. Farrokh Ghaffary reports seeing Hamlet done in this style, and William Beeman saw troupes in Shiraz do quite a funny and recognizable version of Moliere's *The Doctor in Spite of Himself*. Upon asking where they got the plot for the play, the troupes claimed that "there was a Dr. Mulir" in Tehran who wrote very funny plays, which they had adapted."

Nevertheless, troupes of entertainers, called *dasta*, continued to perform in the old improvisatory style in cities and small towns where they were engaged primarily for weddings and village celebrations. A few of the best clowns and performing troupes were able to continue to be accepted in legitimate theatres throughout the country, particularly in Tehran, Isfahan, and Mashad.

Traditional improvisatory performance also attracted the attention of modern authors and playwrights. 'Ali Naṣiriān, a leading Iranian theatre and movie actor, who was the head of the Ministry of Culture's Office of Theatre in Tehran until 1978, has been one of the most active supporters of the traditional theatre form. His production, *Bongāh-e te'ātrāl* (The theatre company), presented first at the Festival of Arts in Shiraz in 1974, is a straight scripted version of a comic improvisatory performance. It was popular at its original showing and was reproduced several times with great success. Another of his plays, *Siāh* (Black), explores the troubled thoughts of the blackface clown, looking for meaning in life. Bijan Mofid's (1935-1984) wildly popular *Jān-neṭār* ([Ready] to sacrifice oneself) preserves the form and spirit of traditional improvisatory comedy, and adds the biting satire present in the Qajar court comedy.

In 1977, the Festival of Arts in Shiraz staged performances from traditional troupes drawn from Khorasan, Kerman, and Fars provinces. Performances were held outdoors in a garden in Shiraz, and were the hit of the festival, widely attended by middle and working-class citizens of Shiraz, who would never have attended other events of the Festival. Nevertheless, the bulk of comic improvisatory performance today is enacted by small troupes of entertainers based in small towns performing for village wedding celebrations.

The number of troupes has diminished greatly since 2000. One reason is the



public feeling that this type of entertainment is no longer modern. Another reason has to do with a basic change in the form and method of financing rural weddings in Iran. In general, this involves shortening the celebration to a single afternoon or evening, having guests bring tangible presents rather than cash gifts, and the use of Western instruments (saxophone, jazz drums, etc.) or recordings of current popular tunes instead of traditional musicians and instruments. This practice was curtailed immediately after the Revolution of 1979, but has been revived both in secret in urban areas, and somewhat more openly in rural districts. Religious officials seem to be somewhat more tolerant of traditional dance in villages, as long as men and women dance separately.

A basic problem during the period before the Revolution was the direct interference of officials of the former Ministry of Culture and Art. Despite the support of a few officials in the ministry, such as 'Ali Naṣiriān, for the promotion of *ruḥawẓi* type theatre in rural areas, provincial officials of the ministry often attempted to interfere with the activities of the various performing troupes, demanding that they had to have licenses to perform.

In research carried out in 1976-79, it was found that there were still several regions in Iran where the tradition was, fortunately, alive and strong. Studies of troupes in these regions are the basis of the discussion, which follows.

Performances of *ruḥawẓi* type theatre in rural areas of Iran take place exclusively in the context of a total program of entertainment provided for a wedding or circumcision ceremony. The entertainers who enact the performance are also musicians, and during the other hours of the celebration provide music and, occasionally, other kinds of entertainment such as acrobatics, music and dancing for the enjoyment of the guests. Fees paid to performers vary in different parts of the country and at different times of the year. In general, celebrations increase just before the religious months like Ramadan, and prices go up with demand. Fees paid to performers in 1977 ranged between \$100 and \$750, to which tips from guests were often added. As with *ta'zia*, performers are housed and fed throughout the course of the wedding. All the wedding entertainment takes place in a convenient courtyard or other open space in the village. Occasionally, the only available place is on the village outskirts. Rugs are spread in the center of the playing area for the performers, and the guests at the celebration arrange themselves in a circle around the playing area. Many people sit on flat roofs of surrounding houses to get a better view of the proceedings.



As with *ta'zia*, the first rank of spectators is always children. They sit as close to the playing area as possible and are a continual problem for the performers because they tend to move closer and closer to the players as the performance progresses. All celebrations have two or three men who work fulltime keeping the children in their place. If the crowd is large, the voices of the performers may not carry to the edges of the crowd. This means that those farther back may see primarily the actions of the players without hearing exactly what they are saying. Additionally, the performance may be interrupted at any minute for a variety of reasons.

The central figure in *ruḥawẓi* performances is the clown. To him falls the burden of comedy production. He also has the most distinctive makeup and clothing of all the performers. In some areas of the country, he is dressed in a red-patterned costume and made up in blackface. Blackface makeup here is usually simple pot-black mixed with vegetable fat. The clown in blackface is generally identified as having come from Africa. This designation is of unclear origin, since blackface makeup is found in improvisatory traditions in countries neighboring Iran. The black makeup probably preceded the African designation. In other areas the clown wears ragged peasant clothing and uses whiteface makeup, usually simple flour (see Karim Šira'i using whiteface makeup, in Jannati 'Aṭā'i, p. 37). In some areas of Iran there were in the past two types of clowns, one in whiteface called *šoli* and the blackface clown, who had various names (e.g. Jamil). Their personal attributes were opposite in nature, the blackface clown being quick and agile, and the whiteface *šoli* being slow (*šol* "loose") and stupid. In performances today the two types are rarely clearly delineated, and often one blackface clown will exhibit both sets of characteristics. Whiteface is more common in northeastern Iran; Baghban (p. 16) cites its exclusive use in the [Herat](#) area. In addition to the clown figure, other role specializations in this tradition include the *ḥāji*, an old traditional merchant in turban and beard; a woman, often played by a male; a youth; a king or ruler; courtiers; and occasional specialized characters such as a doctor, witch, or angel. Performers usually develop into playing only one type of role, although they may play several different types of roles over the whole of their career. As in *ta'zia*, performers graduate to older roles. It is common for a young boy to begin playing women's roles, work up to juvenile roles, eventually playing the king, *ḥāji*, or clown.

Stories are generally uncomplicated and may be loose paraphrases of stories from Iranian folklore, or even classic literature already known to the



audience. The difficult performance conditions are thus compensated for, since the audience need not hear every single word in order to enjoy themselves; one can slip in and out of attention throughout the performance without losing the thread of the action. In contrast to the broad, loose plot structure of the performances are the individual pieces of humor that may be fine-grained, turning on a single word or phrase, and coming one after another in rapid succession. Because the jokes are largely verbal and physical slapstick routines, they can be heard out of context and still be funny. This assures that when the audience members are able to pay attention, they will always find something humorous, which they will be able to understand or react to.

Performers are unanimous in affirming the clown's principal role as the carrier of the burden of production of humor (see Werbner's work on Pakistani migrants' weddings in Britain whose weddings are structurally identical to those found in Iran, including a "ritual clown"). Since the performances are done without any written script, the success of the humor depends on the ease with which the performers can interact, particularly with the clown. The normal pattern for this interaction involves the clown answering, restating, or reacting to statements made by others. Because the clown carries out his performance by "bounding off" the other characters, he is often peripheral to the main story line. Paradoxically, although he is seen more than any other character by the audience and is the principal vehicle for their enjoyment, he is often not mentioned in story synopses given by the players themselves. This suggests that, in this theatrical form, it may be the story line itself that is peripheral, serving as a skeleton on which comic episodes are arranged.

Much of the humor generated by the clown in traditional improvisatory performance revolves around improper behavior toward authority figures: the wealthy *hājī*, often serving as the master of the clown-servant; the juvenile, often the son of the king or *hājī*, with whom the clown often has a bantering friendly relationship; and the king, sultan or court minister, who is often subject to indirect insult in the form of puns and malapropisms. When there is a villain, he is always an authority figure of some sort, able to hide his bad deeds behind the prerogatives of his social status. The wife of the *hājī* is also treated as an authority figure when the clown is a household servant, and some of the most humorous banter occurs between these two characters.

The force of the humor in these situations comes from two sources of paradox



pertaining to the role of the clown vis-à-vis both the authority characters he is dealing with in the playing arena and the audience itself. The first is the paradox involved in the seeming motivation of the clown. He seems to be acting with no knowledge that he is mocking or insulting the other characters. He speaks with distorted speech and his insults are cast in the form of mistakes, mispronunciations, mishearing, and lack of complete understanding of the situation. For example, instead of using an honorific phrase to address the king, he will call him “the head of my donkey,” (*sar-e kār-e man?*) which sounds similar to the intended phrase in Persian. The important point here is that the clown, acting in ignorance, cannot be blamed for his actions, precisely because they are a result of his low social condition vis-à-vis his superiors.

In exhibiting humor in this way the clown is, in effect, thwarting the system of social and linguistic hierarchy (for a critique of work in this area, see Beeman, 1986 and 2001; Hillmann); and, what is more, he is getting away with what he is doing, since he seems not to be doing it on purpose, but rather out of inability or ignorance. The audience reaction is a combination of delight and disbelief mingled with a sense of outrage, and the result of this reaction is violent laughter. Children are perhaps the most affected by this, and they delight in the clown’s every mocking insult.

The humor of the clown can also be ribald in the extreme. In some areas of the country the sexual and scatological references are so clear as to be unmistakable. Troupes in other regions prefer *double entendre* and puns of a more covert nature. There seems to be good historical precedent in this sort of humor as well. The humor of Karim Šira’i contained a good deal of highly explicit language, judging from the interchange below:

Karim: My dear fellow what might your good name be?

Čordaki: What do you want to do with it?

Karim: Write it on my (asshole)!

Čordaki: Donkey’s (cock)!

(Jannati ‘Aṭā’i, p. 39; *Baqqāl-bāzi*, p. 305)

Sexual reference is just as popular with the audience as mocking of authority, and inspires the same kind of raucous laughter. The formulae for the production of this kind of humor involve the same pattern of linguistic distortion, misunderstandings and “sight gags.”



As in the mocking of authority, the clown plays on the community's sense of delight, disbelief, and outrage in his overt use of sexual reference. Though in normal circumstances family members are too embarrassed to discuss or even refer to sexual matters (cf. Beeman and Bhattacharyya), the most impossibly ribald scenes are witnessed and enjoyed by all spectators: the clown and the *ḥāji*'s wife together ("mistakenly") under the covers; the clown and women talking about vegetables in ways which suggest that they are really talking about sexual organs; the clown and the *ḥāji* or sultan juxtaposed in physical situations with obvious homosexual overtones. As always, however, the clown undertakes these actions in total innocence, seemingly unaware of the nature of his actions.

In general, then, one sees that comic improvisatory theatre has had a chronological history not dissimilar to that of *ta'zia*. It had historical roots corresponding roughly to the same time frame as *ta'zia*, reaching a point of rapid development during the Safavid era, being protected and encouraged by the court during the Qajar period, and suffering a decline and a rapid movement into rural areas of the country during the reigns of Reżā Shah and Moḥammad Reżā Shah Pahlavi (1925-79). Like *ta'zia*, *ruḥawẓi*-type theatre was hindered by government officials in its free development, despite some limited, belated encouragement by a small group of intellectuals just prior to the revolutionary events of 1979.

Like *ta'zia*, *ruḥawẓi* continues to carry out a set of important social and emotional functions for persons who patronize it. It presents a whole range of familiar characters, stories, and settings for the audience, but its ostensible purpose is different. It mocks and attacks the whole fabric of social and sexual structures which bind the spectators in their everyday life, and rather than washing the pressure of life away in a sea of tears, it aims to dispel those pressures in gales of laughter, the louder and longer the better.

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