



TA'ZIA

TA'ZIA, Arabic verbal noun from form II *'azza* ('to express sympathy with, to console, to mourn'), a term used for the Shi'ite passion play performed in Persia. It is the sole form of serious drama to have developed in the world of Islam, with the exception of contemporary theater, which was introduced to Islamic countries, along with other Western influences, in the mid-19th century. Nowadays, a less developed form of ta'zia drama can be seen among the Shi'ite communities of southern Lebanon, southern Iraq, and the western shores of the Persian Gulf. This is, however, a recent importation from Persia. Often the Persian verb *k'āndan* ('to read, to recite, to perform') is compounded with *ta'zia*, forming the words *ta'zia-k'ān*, which means a ta'zia performer, and *ta'zia-k'āni*, which signifies a ta'zia production. Another term for the ta'zia drama, now less commonly used, is *šabih-k'āni*. On the Indian subcontinent, and in the Caribbean basin, ta'zia is an imaginary representation of Imam Ḥosayn's (d. 680, the third Shi'ite imam,) tomb, made of bamboo, colored paper, and tinsel. These ta'zias (sometimes several stories high, sometimes small) are carried or wheeled in processions during the months of Moḥarram and Šafar. *Ta'zia* reenacts the passion and death of Imam Ḥosayn, son of 'Ali b. [Abi Ṭāleb](#), and the beloved grandson of the Prophet Moḥammad.

According to tradition, Ḥosayn was brutally murdered, along with 72 of his male children, brothers, cousins, and companions, as he contested his right to the Caliphate. The bloody massacre took place in the sun-baked desert of Karbala (Karbālā'), about 100 km southwest of present-day Baghdad, on the 'Ašurā' day, the tenth day of the Muslim month of Moḥarram, in the 61st year



of the Muslim era, corresponding to 10 October 680 CE. For the Shi'ites, the tragic death of Ḥosayn overshadows all other human tragedies and has assumed almost cosmic proportions. The 1982 Nobel Prize laureate in Literature, Elias Canetti (1905-94), writes in his masterpiece *Crowds and Power* (p. 148): "Emotionally the contemplation of the personality and fate of Husain stands in the center of the faith; they are the mainspring of the believer's religious experience. His death interpreted as voluntary self-immolation, and it is through his suffering that the saints gain paradise."

The death of the 'Wronged Martyr' (*šahid-e maẓlum*), or the 'Commander of Martyrs' (*amir al-šohadā'*)—as Ḥosayn is often called—gave Shi'ite Islam its dynamic force. Ever since the 'cataclysmic' martyrdom of Ḥosayn and his companions, the desire to avenge his death and to spill blood in the name of this holy cause has been omnipresent in the Shi'ite community. Every Shi'ite desires to identify with the suffering and sacrifice of Ḥosayn. Every year, during the first decade of Moḥarram, huge crowds of mourners whip themselves into an almost inconceivable frenzy. The rituals for the fallen Ḥosayn generate emotions that rival those of the early Christian martyrs who underwent torture for their faith. Canetti calls the pain that the Shi'ites inflict on themselves in public with flagellation and other forms of bodily mortification "the pain of Husain, which by being exhibited, becomes the pain of the whole community" (p. 150). One can say that according to the Shi'ites there is time, which is no time, and there is space, which is no space. What happened to Ḥosayn in the late 7th century CE takes place today whenever and wherever the Shi'ites live and are oppressed.

Ta'zia as a form of ritual theater stems from the fusion of ambulatory and stationary rites that co-existed for centuries before being united. The most common ambulatory ritual observance is *dasta*, or procession. There is no doubt that the Ḥosayn *dasta* was influenced by ritual parades lamenting the unjust and sudden deaths of such heroes as Tammuz in Mesopotamia and Siāvoš in Transoxania. The *dasta* in Moḥarram and Šafar developed from simple processions into complex rituals occurring annually among Shi'ite communities worldwide. The most notable feature of the *dasta* is the self-mortification of the participants in tandem with accompanying cymbals and drums. Marchers chant dirges and threnodies, curse the villains of Karbala (FIGURE 1). Canetti describes the *dasta* as "an orchestra of grief" (p. 150).

The first recorded public *dasta* observing the death of Ḥosayn took place in Baghdad in the year 352/963. Processions of Shi'ites circulated the city,

weeping, wailing, and striking their heads with grief (Ebn Kaṭīr, p. 243). The fact that this description of Moḥarrām rituals comes from what used to be Babylon made some scholars view the roots of ta'zia as deriving from the ancient annual mourning processions in honor of Tammuz, a god of agriculture and flocks who personifies the creative powers of spring. However, as Ehsan Yarshater points out, “it is most probably to Eastern Iran in pre-Islamic times where we should look for the basis of a tradition which provided a ready mold for the development of the ta'ziyeh” (Yarshater, 1979, p. 88). That “mold” is the story of the life and death of a beloved, gallant prince Siāvoš. Siāvoš, like Imam Ḥosayn, had a foreboding of his fate—his passion and cruel death. He says: “Not before long I shall suffer a lamentable death at the hand of the king. Innocent and afflicted, I shall be killed ... Slander and ill-fortune will bring me low, even though I am guiltless” (*Šāh-nāma*, as quoted by Yarshater, 1979, p. 92). However, the following four verses from the *Šāh-nāma* sound as if they were coming not from the mouth of Siāvoš, but from that of Ḥosayn in the ta'zia devoted to his martyrdom: “They will strike off this innocent head of mine and will place my crown in my heart’s blood. I shall find neither bier, nor shroud, nor grave. Nor would anyone shed tears for me in the assembly. Like an exile shall I lie in the dust and with my head severed by a sword from my body” (Yarshater, 1979, p. 92). According to Yarshater (1979, p. 89), further parallels to ta'zia could be found in the Middle Persian epic called *Memorial of Zarēr* (*Ayādgār ī Zarērān*), which had been sung for centuries by bards and minstrels. The ta'zia that developed on the Iranian plateau was therefore primarily nourished by Eastern Iranian tradition, but the Western Mesopotamian tradition should not be totally disregarded as well.

When Shi'ite Islam became the state religion in Persia in 907/1501, popular rituals including *dasta* helped to spread the faith across the Iranian plateau. Foreign residents who spent time in Persia during the 17th and 18th centuries have left very rich accounts of *dastas* they witnessed, providing a record of the development of this ritual’s pageantry. The majority of popular Shi'ite rituals are conducted in the open, in public spaces, and can be viewed by passers-by. Western visitors to Iran—diplomats, merchants, and missionaries—were fascinated with these rituals and have given us, from the early 17th century onward, quite extensive written accounts of what they saw. Even though some rituals like ta'zia were sometimes conducted in private, foreigners were often invited to attend the solemnities. It seems that ta'zia has been the most interesting and intriguing Shi'ite ritual for Westerners. The most detailed and systematic survey of foreign accounts of Shi'ite rituals comes from Willem



Floor's book *The History of Theater in Iran* (2005).

A steady increase was observed in the number of participants in the *dasta* costumed to represent various characters and episodes from the battle at Karbala. Wheeled floats with living tableaux were constructed to pass in front of the multitudes of penitent spectators. A vivid description of the Moḥarram parades was made in 1737 by Thomas Salmons and Matthias Van Goch (pp. 249-53):

Outstanding in the large public processions are the big theatrically arranged wagons showing scenes of his [Ḥosayn's, *P.Ch.*] life and his deeds, his battles, and his death. These wagons are often pulled about accompanied by people, in armor, flags, and emblems of war of victory, depicting some of Hussein's deeds. For example, a wagon representing the death of Hussein has a deck-like cover coated with sand to represent the arid battlefield. Underneath people are lying thrusting their heads, arms and hands through holes in the cover so they will lie on the sand above to appear as dismembered limbs sprinkled with blood or red paint and colored with a deathly pallor so as to look most natural. Hussein, pallid and bloody, is lying on the other wagon. Several living doves sit on his body, while others are nesting in his blood. After a while, the men under the cover release their bonds, two at a time, so that they can 'fly to Medina' to announce Hussein's death to his sister. Wherever this wagon passes, the people set up such a wailing to show their grief in so many ways and with such conviction, imitation, and naturalistic representations that one wonders at their capacity to give vent to such appropriate signs of suffering so realistically. Their spirit shows through plainly in this impersonation, nor do they spare their bodies: in zeal or desperation, they shed their blood, wound themselves, or are wounded in fights with others; they carry out their intentions with such zeal that it sometimes leads to their own death. It is not possible to tell the difference between feigned dizziness, fainting, and the real thing. One must consider what the stricken people on these tragic wagons endure while presenting their limbs, decapitated heads, hands, and legs in such an uncomfortable position while lying there as if they were dead themselves. [They do this] in all kinds of weather during the processions. Still they suffer rather than move or do something which would disturb that verisimilitude which might be lost.

The wheeled floats eventually became a processional ta'zia. Today, the processional ta'zias known as *ta'zia-kāravāni* consist of a train of huge flatbed trucks pulled by tractors, on which sequential episodes of the play (*majles*) of

the ta'zia are performed (FIGURE 2). Most commonly, the *ta'zia-kāravāni* is arranged for 'Āšurā' and the *majles* (the episode) is that of *The Martyrdom of Ḥosayn*.

According to modern performing arts terminology, what Salmons and Van Goch saw falls into the category of performance. But it was not yet theater—what was missing were lyrics. However, the Karbala tragedy had a great impact on literature, especially on a genre known as *maqṭal* ('martyrdom story'). The *maqṭal*, in turn, gave birth to a stationary Karbala ritual known by various names in various countries. In Iran, it is known as *rowża-kvāni*. The name of this public lamentation is derived from the title of a literary masterpiece *Rowżat al-šohadā* ('*The Garden of the Martyrs*'). This work, written in Persian but titled in Arabic, was composed in 908/1502-3 by Ḥosayn b. 'Ali Wā'eẓ Kāšefi (d. 910/1504-5) during the time when Shi'ite Twelver Islam was being imposed by the Safavid shahs as the state religion of Persia. *Rowża-kvāni*, which literally means 'recitation from *The Garden [of Martyrs]*,' is popularly known as *rowża*. *Rowżat al-šohadā* is Kāšefi's dramatic exposition of the tragic Karbala events in straightforward, moving, yet simple, language, which is responsible for the book's tremendous popular success. In the eyes of the Shi'ites, Ḥosayn did not fight for wealth, power, or political ambition, but for the Islamic ideal of social and political justice. He fought and sacrificed his life for the underdog, the unprivileged, the oppressed, and humiliated. The engaging prose narration, illustrated with occasional verses of poetry (mainly *dobaytis*) and vibrant description of the causes for which Ḥosayn fought makes it the master *maqṭal* which has dominated popular Shi'ite literature since early 1500s. It introduces and preserves the timeless quality of this tragedy, which allows Shi'ite communities to measure themselves against the principles and the paradigm of Ḥosayn.

Although we know from historic sources that the siege at Karbala lasted for nine days and ended on the 'Āšurā' day, the tenth of Moḥarram, with a swift and brutal attack by the overwhelming forces of Yazid I b. Mo'āwiya (the second Omayyad caliph, r. 60-64/680-3), Kāšefi provides almost every one of the 72 martyred companions of Ḥosayn with a chance to show his devotion, bravery, and chivalry, as each of them—separately or in small groups—fights the whole enemy army. The drama is sharpened by the fact that Ḥosayn and his relatives are the witnesses to all the savagery and malevolence of Yazid's soldiers. It is only after he has seen the cruelty of the enemy and the death of his sons, brothers, and followers with his own eyes that Ḥosayn's turn comes



to fight and die. His death has been deferred so that he could witness and feel the suffering of his people, their incredible thirst on the sun-baked plain of Karbala, and the bloody encounter of his supporters with the thousand-times stronger enemy forces. Ḥosayn's determination to fight to the end, despite his mental and physical agony, makes him the Commander of Martyrs (*amir-al-ṣohadā*). The book ends with a chapter devoted to the survivors of Karbala: the women and the fourth Imam 'Ali b. Al-Ḥosayn, the surviving son of Ḥosayn. This includes a gory depiction of the decapitated heads of the martyrs being carried on spikes and the caravan of chained women being led to the caliph Yazid in Damascus. The ill treatment of the survivors is vividly depicted.

At first it was customary to recite or chant a chapter from *The Garden of Martyrs* daily in public during the first ten days of Moḥarram. Today, despite the fact that this oration is still known as the 'Garden Recitation' (*rowḏa-k̲vāni*), the original text has been largely abandoned, as each *rowḏa-k̲vān*, or narrator, uses his own creative skills to conjure up the story, but still adheres to the framework of *The Garden of the Martyrs*. The art of *rowḏa-k̲vāni* depends on the ability of the *rowḏa-k̲vān* to manipulate the assembled crowd, using his (or her, if the gathering is entirely female) choice of episodes from the tragedy together with body language and voice tonality. A successful *rowḏa-k̲vān* is able to bring his listeners to a state of heightened emotion, in which they vicariously experience the suffering of Ḥosayn and the other martyrs. All classes of society participate in the *rowḏa-k̲vāni* which can be held anywhere from black tents set up for the occasion in the public square of a village or town, to a mosque or a courtyard of a private house, or even to special edifices built for the Shi'ite mourning rituals called *ḥosayniya* or *takia*. These buildings have been constructed in Persia from the end of the 18th century onwards.

Rowḏa-k̲vāni belongs to the category of stationary Shi'ite commemorative rituals, which are collectively known as *majles al-'azā* ('mourning ceremony'). It starts with chants invoking the Prophet Mohammad and other saints by a eulogist (*maddāḥ*) and is followed by a *rowḏa-k̲vān*, a master storyteller, who recites and sings the story of Ḥosayn and his family and followers at the bloody battle of Karbala while sitting on a pulpit (*menbar*) above the assembled crowd. His rapid chanting in a high-pitched voice alternates with sobbing and crying to arouse the audience to an intense state of emotion. The audience responds with weeping, chest-beating, and body flagellation. The performance can last from a couple of hours to an entire day, well into the night as a succession of *rowḏa-k̲vāns* are being used. The *rowḏa-k̲vāni* ends with

congregational singing of dirges (*nowḥa*).

According to popular belief, participation in *rowża-kvāni* ensures participants of intercession by Ḥosayn on the Judgment Day. Almost from its inception, it has been a tradition that mixed the past with the contemporary, and the *rowża-kvāns* often make digressions into the political, social, and moral issues of the day. This makes the *rowża-kvāni* a very important political weapon.

The ta'ziapassion play was born in the middle of the 18th century (although many scholars believe it occurred as early as in the end of the 17th century; see Beyzā'i) when the costumed marchers of the *dasta* began to recite the stories of the *rowża-kvāni*. The story lines of the *rowża-kvāni* were converted into the dramatic texts of the ta'zia. The movement of the parade was changed into the motions of the actors; the parade costumes became stage costumes. In the beginning, the passion play was nothing more than a short playlet integrated into the procession and performed at street corners. Soon, however, it was separated from the parade and became an independent event performed in the open—in courtyards, private houses, and special buildings called *takia* or *ḥosayniya*. In the second half of the 19th century, these buildings were major features in Iranian towns. European travelers of the time relate that these structures were being erected in every neighborhood. *Takia* and *ḥosayniya* were mainly built by the well-to-do as a pious act and a public service. Some edifices could seat thousands of spectators, but most accommodated only a few hundreds. Many were temporary structures built especially for the Moḥarram observances (Calmard, 1974, pp. 73-126; 1975, pp. 133-62).

The most famous *takia* theater was the Takia Dowlat, the Royal Theater in Tehran, built in the 1870s by Nāṣer-al-Din Shah (r. 1848-9.; [FIGURE 3](#)). According to many European visitors, its dazzling splendor and intensity of dramatic action overshadowed even the opera houses in Western capitals. The first American envoy to Persia, Samuel Benjamin (1837-1914, stayed in Persia in 1883-85), was invited by the royal court to attend the Moḥarram celebrations at the Takia Dowlat and recorded his impressions: "On looking over the vast arena a sight met my gaze which was indeed extraordinary. The interior of the building is nearly two hundred feet in diameter and some eighty feet high. A domed frame of timbers, firmly spliced and braced with iron, springs from the walls, giving support to the awning that protects the interior from the sunlight and rain. ... A more oriental form of illuminating the building was seen in the prodigious number of lustres and candlesticks, all of



glass and protected from the air by glass shades open on the top and variously colored; they were concentrated against the wall in immense glittering clusters. Estimating from those attached on one box, I judged that there were upwards of five thousand candles in these lustres. ... In the center of the arena was a circular stage of masonry, raised three feet and approached by two stairways. On one side of the building a pulpit of white marble was attached to the wall. The entire arena with the exception of a narrow passage around the stage was absolutely packed with women, thousands on thousands. At a rough estimate it seemed to me that quite four thousand women were seated there cross-legged on the earthen floor, which was made slightly sloping in order to enable those in the rear to see over the heads of those before them” (Benjamin, pp. 382-88).

Women in particular have been attached to ta'zia, not only out of devotion to Ḥosayn and the other martyrs, but also due to a natural empathy with the women at Karbala which causes their own sufferings to pale in comparison. Representation of the role of the women of Karbala, the women related to Imam Ḥosayn and his slaughtered comrades, belongs to one of the most interesting artistic developments in Islam. The dramatic recitation of the heroic stand of the women in *rowża-kāni* evolved into the dramatic action of the ta'zia performances which in turn inspired the depiction of these dramas in paintings, on canvas, and on walls. Šādeq Homāyuni, an authority on the ta'zia writes:

Women in Iranian *ta'zia* appear in two entirely contrasted countenances: in the good countenance of the protagonist and in the evil demeanor of the antagonists. In the first category, woman is wholesomely good, chaste, pure, innocent, and gentle. She is compassionate and acquainted with pain and suffering. A self-sacrificing devotee, who is ready to endure great hardship for the sake of relatives, friends, and companions, she has no fear of bloody and painful events or the perilous surroundings in which she finds herself. She faces bravely the tempest of calamity and affliction. Her kindness places her at the apex of manifested glory. And her generosity is exemplary (Homāyuni, 1999, p. 46).

Among the extraordinary group of women that appear in the ta'zia, Zaynab plays the role of a matriarch. As a daughter of *Fāṭema* (d. 11/632-3) and Imam 'Ali, a granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammad, and a full sister of Ḥosayn, she is entitled to that role. It is not only her bloodline, but also her incredible personality that makes her a leading female protagonist in the Moḥarram

cycle. She is an inexhaustible reserve of physical and psychological strength and energy. Her devotion to her brother Ḥosayn knows no boundaries. Because Zaynab is Ḥosayn's beloved sister and not his wife, the affection and love between the siblings is shown in abundance in the ta'zia. In accordance with the ancient custom in that part of the world, marital affection is not demonstrated in public. That is why in Karbala rituals, and especially in the ta'zia, the affection for Ḥosayn and his wives, and vice versa, is not shown.

However, there is a great deal of affection shown between Zaynab and Šāhbānu, the Persian wife of Ḥosayn. It is commonly believed that Šāhbānu, the daughter of the last Sasanian king Yazdegerd III (r. 633-51), was taken captive by the Arab conquerors. Eventually, she was given to the family of the Prophet and was married to Ḥosayn. From this union was born the fourth Imam of the Twelver Shi'ites, 'Ali b. al-Ḥosayn, known as Zayn-al-'ābedin, the only male survivor of the Karbala massacre. Though Šāhbānu was happy and honored to be the wife of Ḥosayn, she endured much suffering as a prisoner of war before she became a member of the Prophet's family. This is why Zaynab and the women of Karbala try to help her escape a second captivity under the forces of Yazid. In the ta'zia devoted to Šāhbānu, Zaynab expresses her concern for Šāhbānu's well-being in beautiful sentiments filled with compassion and evident fondness (according to a ta'ziamanuscript from Kashan, property of the author).

The relationships between men and women at Karbala are delineated only by expressions of respect and admiration. Demonstrations of love and tenderness, which are so important in a dramatic presentation, fall mainly into the hands of Zaynab and Sakina, the young daughter of Ḥosayn. Sakina is the darling of ta'zia and *rowża-kvāni* audiences. With her incredulous child's eyes she sees her friends, cousins, brother, uncle, and, finally, her father, killed one after another. Her story moves the audience to tears and even rage. In addition to her psychological torment, she suffers horrible thirst. When Ḥosayn departs for the battlefield, she throws herself in front of his horse in order to have a few additional moments with her father before he dies. As Ḥosayn holds her on his lap, and lovingly cautions her not to burn her little feet in the hot sand, she begs him not to leave. Despite her young age, Sakina knows that her pleas are useless and that her father's final battle and death are inevitable.

Despite this great tribute to the women of Karbala, they appear physically faceless in ta'zia performances. The roles of women in the ta'zia have been



traditionally performed by men, and in order to disguise their masculinity, veils always cover their faces. The protagonist women of the ta'zia appear on the stage covered in black from head to toe. Only boys playing the roles of young girls show their faces. As the ta'zia gained great popularity in the second quarter of the 19th century, a very interesting development took place: the ta'zia performance images were transferred by artists from the stage onto canvases and walls in the form of religious paintings. Women in these paintings were the faithful copies of those on the stage—faceless. This iconographic convention survived until the Islamic Revolution of 1978-79, and must be considered a phenomenal achievement in the development in the history of Islamic art (Chelkowski, 1989, pp. 98-111).

Performance Space. Although in the second half of the 19th century *takia* buildings were found in many Iranian towns, a distinctly recognizable *takia* style of architecture did not emerge. There are, however, common characteristics of almost all *takias*, which preserve and enhance the dramatic interplay between the actors and spectators. This is theater-in-the-round. The main performance space is a stark, curtainless, raised platform in the center of the building or courtyard (FIGURE 4, FIGURE 5, FIGURE 6). This central space can be of various shapes; it is surrounded by a circular path, usually covered by sand. This space is used for equestrian and foot battles. It is also used by the performers for subplots and for indicating the journeys and the passage of time. The scenes are changed by rotation of the stage; the platform itself does not revolve, rather the actors jump off the stage and circumambulate it. An actor will announce that he is going to such-and-such a place and leap off the main stage. By climbing back on to it or a secondary platform, he can announce that he has arrived at his destination. These secondary (auxiliary) stages are often erected on the periphery of the circular space, extending into the audience-filled pit. Scenes of special significance are acted there. In addition, there are usually several passageways through the seating area, running from the central platform to the outer wall of the *takia*. These provide access for messengers, troops, animals, or vehicles. The action extends from the main stage to the sand-covered circular band, to the auxiliary stages, and into the auditorium (FIGURE 7). Skirmishes often take place behind the audience in unwallled *takia*. This centrifugal and centripetal movement of the action, from the centrally situated stage out to the *takia* periphery and back, engulfs the audience and makes it part of the play. In many situations, the spectators actually physically participate in the drama. In the past it was a tradition that actors in the plays depicting the Karbala slaughter would always

return to the central stage and wait there for their turn to act, symbolically representing the encirclement of Ḥosayn's party by the enemy.

Décor and props. There is a marked difference between the starkness of the stage décor and the richness of the theater decoration. Symbolic props serve as décor: a basin of water, for example, represents the [Euphrates River](#); a branch of a tree stands for a palm grove. The empty stage represents the desolate plain of Karbala. The actors carry non-symbolic props onto the stage, such as chairs, mattresses, and pans; sometimes those who are not acting at that particular moment assist in this task. The imagination of the spectators fills the gaps. In contrast, the ta'zias which fell into the non-Moḥarram repertory and were staged at the Takia Dowlat during the reign of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah (1848-96) were very colorful and filled with pageantry. The historical situation was re-created in terms of contemporary splendor, a tradition also visible in Persian miniature painting.

Actors and acting. There is a clear-cut division between the protagonists and antagonists in the ta'zia. The protagonists sing their parts while the antagonists recite theirs. Further accentuation of this division is given by the color of their costumes. The family of the Prophet wears green to symbolize the Garden of Paradise, while their opponents are dressed in red, which represents blood, suffering, and cruelty. Both the mode of delivery and the variations of the costume color are further extended to the good and bad characters in the non-Karbala plays. Antagonists in the ta'zia declaim their lines, often in violent shrieking voices. Frequently the antagonists are made to appear as ridiculous buffoons, overplayed and overacted. In general, the acting technique, mimicry, and gestures of the opponents are more pronounced than those of the protagonists. Men play female roles, and young boys play the roles of girls. In the past, and especially during the heyday of the ta'zia during the second half of the 19th century, actors were chosen according to their physical suitability for specific roles. A strong, handsome, middle-aged man played the role of Imam Ḥosayn, with a long beard. 'Abbās, the standard bearer of Ḥosayn and his half-brother, had to be tall, with broad shoulders and a very slim waste. Good physical appearance was not the only requisite for a ta'zia actor, however. He also needed to have a good singing voice. Actors used to read their lines from little folded scripts which they held in the palms of their hands, although professional actors learned their lines by heart, but even the best professional performers were only part-time actors ([FIGURE 8](#)). Each one was employed in his own field as a bus driver, mechanic, gardener,



dentist, etc. Holding a script in the hand indicated that the actor was only a role carrier and that he was not assuming the personality of the character that he played. Today, actors in professional troupes know most of their lines by heart (if they read from notes, they do it inconspicuously). Influenced heavily by the realistic acting of 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 themselves with their parts so strongly that they are swept away by their situations. In turn, the audience is caught up in an atmosphere of potent and sincere emotions.

Director. A ta'zia director is a “man for all seasons,” a superman of the theater. In addition, he acts as the producer, stage manager, prompter, PR man, and financial director for the company. The director is always on hand during the performance, and he supervises the movement of actors, musicians, and audience as if he was a traffic policeman. Ever present on the stage, he gives the actors their cues, helps children and inexperienced actors find their positions, holds the stirrup for a horseman, and helps a would-be martyr get dressed in his winding sheet. His ubiquitous presence does not look distracting to the spectators as he is seen as an integral part of the ta'zia drama. In the past, the director was called *mo'in al-bokā'* ('master of weeping'), since his skills in directing the production elicited strong emotions of grief and sorrow from the audience. Today he is usually called *ta'zia-gardān*, or ta'zia director. Due to the influence of television, he is less visible on the stage.

Costumes. 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 costumes were meant to help the audience recognize the characters, and this created stereotypical conventions that were modified by the passage of time. Thus, an actor in Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's era playing a Western ambassador wore a frock coat—the standard diplomatic outfit of the 19th century; since World War II, the same ambassador may be depicted wearing a British military uniform. Ḥosayn and his fellow warriors used to be depicted as wearing long white shirts and knee-length green coats topped by chain mail, Wellington boots, and helmets with green plumes. Coats of mail were not readily available during the Pahlavi period (1925-1979), and so they were usually replaced with military officer's jackets. Performers in women's parts wear baggy black garments which cover them from head to toe. Additional clues to a character's identity can be discerned through various

accessories: sometimes a learned man 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 loose white shirt, it is understood that the white symbolizes a shroud and he is ready to sacrifice his life and be killed.

Performance time and repertoire. When ta'zia began to develop as a distinct form apart from the Moḥarram processions, it was staged mainly during the first ten days of Moḥarram. Soon, plays devoted to the plight of the surviving members of the Karbala massacre extended the duration of ta'zia performances to the rest of Moḥarram and the following month of Ṣafar. Plays commemorating the birthday of a saint or a prophet provided an excuse to extend ta'zia productions to other months. This dramatic theatrical form soon became very popular among people of all walks of life. Affluent patrons started inviting troupes to perform ta'zia as an act of thanksgiving for the recovery of health, the safe conclusion of a journey, a return from a pilgrimage, or simply as the fulfillment of a wish.

In this way, ta'zia was no longer restricted to the first ten days of Moḥarram. It is now performed throughout the year. The plays devoted to the tragedy at Karbala and its surrounding events form the core of the ta'zia repertoire. Although the massacre of Ḥosayn and his followers historically took place in one day on the tenth of Moḥarram, in ta'zia the battle is divided into many different episodes performed on separate days. The only fixed day and play in the Moḥarram repertoire is the martyrdom of Ḥosayn on the tenth day, or 'Āsurā', while other episodes can be performed in varying sequence. 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 b. Abi Ṭāleb (d. 60/680). This is followed by a daily progression of plays, each devoted to the martyrdom of various 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 philosophical and religious nature.

Most commonly, on the sixth day of Moḥarram, *The Martyrdom of Ḥorr* is performed. Ḥorr b. Riāḥi is a commander of the opposing forces who deserts Yazid's army, joins Ḥosayn's cause, and is killed. The seventh day of Moḥarram is devoted to *The Martyrdom of Qāsem the Bridegroom*. Qāsem is

the son of Ḥosayn's elder brother, Ḥasan b. Abi Ṭāleb (625-70, the second Shi'ite Imam). It was Ḥasan's will that Qāsem be married to Fāṭema, the daughter of Ḥosayn. Both Qāsem and Fāṭema are among the besieged at Karbala. They are still in their teens, but Ḥosayn, realizing that their deaths are imminent, arranges a wedding party in order to fulfill the promise he gave to his brother. After the marriage vows are exchanged, but before the union can be consummated, Qāsem leaves to fight the enemy and is killed. On the eighth of Moḥarram, *The Martyrdom of 'Ali-Akbar* is performed. 'Ali-Akbar is the eldest and favorite son of Ḥosayn. In various assaults against a great number of enemy soldiers, 'Ali-Akbar proves his gallantry. Despite the suffocating heat and many wounds, 'Ali-Akbar fights until he sheds his last drop of blood. His death overwhelms Ḥosayn, his family, and all those in the audience (FIGURE 9). On the ninth of Moḥarram, *The Martyrdom of 'Abbās* is staged. 'Abbās is a half-brother of Ḥosayn and his standard bearer. 'Abbās is also called "the water carrier" since he is killed while trying to obtain water from the Euphrates River for his family. Thanks to his chivalry, bravery, and gallantry, 'Abbās enjoys a special place in the hearts of the Shi'ites, particularly those of the women. Each play contributes to the gradually increasing emotional build-up anticipating the supreme sacrifice of Ḥosayn, the Commander of Martyrs. The following figures portray other aspects of the ta'zia performance:

FIGURE 10. After seeing all of his male companions killed in front of his very eyes, Ḥosayn's anguish and pain are intense. He readies himself for his final battle and martyrdom by donning a white shroud, which creates the first catharsis. The second catharsis comes when he is killed.

FIGURE 11. Ḥosayn on the way to battle.

FIGURE 12. The Genies come to aid Ḥosayn, but he refuses their help, saying: "I must die to keep the purity of the faith."

FIGURE 13. Šemr kills Ḥosayn.

FIGURE 14. The final scene in the ta'zia of *The Martyrdom of Ḥosayn*. The central stage is strewn with dead bodies. The lion guards the corpses and holds up the green flag of the Family of the Prophet.

FIGURE 15. Ta'zia: an imaginary representation of the tomb of Ḥosayn.

Ḥosayn's death does not always conclude the essential ta'zia repertory. Performances may continue after 'Āšurā' to depict the tragic lot of the female members of Ḥosayn's family who were taken to Damascus as captives. The most famous ta'zia depicting the hardship and maltreatment of Ḥosayn's relatives in captivity is a play called *The Bazaar of Damascus*. New plays that depicted the sacrifices of Shi'ite martyrs before and after Karbala were added to the ta'ziafold over time. Based on the Qur'an, *ḥadīth*, legends, and current events, these productions provided an excuse to extend ta'zia dramas throughout the year.

Even these non-Moḥarram plays, however, retain a connection to the tragedy at Karbala 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 present into one unifying moment of intensity which allows the spectators to be simultaneously in the performance space and at Karbala.

The body of ta'zia plays is enormous. Since ta'zia is a living tradition, new plays and local variations on the traditional themes are still being composed. The Cerulli collection of 1,055 ta'zia manuscripts housed in the Vatican library is an ample evidence of this (Rossi and Bombaci). The non-professional Moḥarram village tradition of ta'zia must be mentioned in addition to the professional ta'zia troupes. Such a ta'zia is usually organized on or about the day of 'Āšurā' by a semi-professional or retired ta'zia actor who brings together a group of villagers to perform for solely religious reasons. It is an act of communal piety with very little artistic value. 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.

Because of fundamental political and social changes in Iran during the 20th century, both individual and communal monetary support for ta'zia productions dwindled and forced troupes to operate on a commercial basis. In the 1930s, restrictions imposed by the government forced ta'zia performances to move from towns to rural areas. The situation changed after the Islamic Revolution when the Ḥosayn paradigm was used to strengthen spirit and military preparedness in the eight-year-long war against Iraq in 1980-88 (see [IRAQ vii. IRAN-IRAQ WAR](#)). Ta'zia now enjoys the patronage of the Ministry of



Islamic Guidance (*wezārat-e eršād-e eslāmi*). Today, professional ta'zia companies usually stay in one place for ten days to a two-week period, giving a different play every day, and occasionally giving performances both in the afternoon and evening.

Music in the ta'zia. Since ta'zia is musical drama, vocal and instrumental performance are important. Singers are accompanied by a variety of drums, trumpets (*šeypur*), 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 ta'zia troupe has arrived. It may be repeated several times, particularly if the audience needs more time to assemble. Once the spectators have gathered, a fanfare is played while the actors file into the performance area in procession. This is followed by a short overture that sets the mood for the play about to be performed. The drama opens with the *piš-k'vāni*, or prologue, which presents a summary of the plot sung by the chorus (FIGURE 16). During the *piš-k'vāni*, everybody sings, including the antagonists. Usually the chorus gathers in the main performance space, but occasionally it 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 a mood or advance the action by indicating the passage of time. They also serve to cue a singer by establishing the particular *dastgāh*, or mode, in which he is about to perform. He will then sing the scene *a capella*. 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 ta'zia in the latter part of the 19th century, the Tehran Polytechnic College, was founded in Persia and staffed by foreign instructors. The curriculum consisted largely of military subjects, including band music. Eventually, quite a number of these marches found their way into the repertory of the *takia* theaters.

Ta'zia and literature. The ta'zia style of writing is anti-literary, since the scripts are almost never intended for reading but solely for performing. They are written as separate parts for each of the *dramatis personae* on loose narrow sheets of paper that the actors can hold in the palms of their hands. The value of these strips must, therefore, be measured in its theatrical context, taking into consideration the setting, costumes, movement, and the sung and spoken aspects of the drama.

Ta'zia and the Western theater. Since about 1950s, 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 in Persia. 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 Hussein 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).

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, actively retains a fundamental principle of intimacy in an enormous space with masses of actively participating spectators. This is *le theatre total*. In the words of Benjamin, the first American envoy to Persia, "Ta'ziyeh is an interesting exhibition of the dramatic genius of the Persian race."

At the beginning of the 21st century, there is a new interest in ta'zia performing technique in the West. Ta'zia has been performed at art festivals in Avignon and Paris in France, Parma and Rome in Italy, and in New York City. France was the first non-Muslim country in which ta'zia was performed at the 1991 Festival of Arts in Avignon. It was a very bold move on the part of the French authorities to invite a ta'zia troupe to France. Apart from political implications, there were also social and dramatic connotations for these performances. How could the Shi'ite passion play be performed for a non-Muslim, non-Shi'ite audience in the city of popes? The performances were a great success, and the actors were able to build a bridge with the audiences. The French press gave rave reviews. Nine years later, ta'zia appeared at the Festival d'Automne in Paris. The performances in Avignon took place in a traditional open space in the Cloister of the Celestines, but in Paris they took place in a circus tent erected for the purpose. On the way back from Paris, the same troupe performed at the festival under the banner *From Ancient Persia*



to Iran, which was held in Parma, Italy. As in the French capital, the performances in Parma took place in a tent erected in a garden.

In July 2003, *The Martyrdom of Ḥosayn* was performed by an Iranian troupe in Rome in a former soap factory, which had been converted into a theater. It was a great success for the well-known Iranian cinema director, 'Abbās Kiārostami, who directed the play. Kiārostami added an unusual element to the production by erecting six huge screens around the spectators on which the Italian audience could watch the reactions of a ta'zia audience in Iran. The film was a black and white documentary shot by Kiārostami himself. Perhaps Kiārostami employed this technique to make the Italians feel as if they were part of a ta'zia audience in Iran.

Finally, three episodes (*majles*) of the ta'zia were performed to a sold-out house at the Lincoln Center Summer Festival in 2002 in New York. This must be viewed as an extraordinary achievement when one takes into consideration that the ta'zia, which is the apotheosis of martyrdom, was performed in a huge tent next to the Metropolitan Opera House nine months after 11 September 2001. Critical reaction from the press was extremely varied. The director of the Festival, Nigel Redden, sums it up succinctly: "The best affirmation of all our efforts to bring ta'ziyeh to New York, came on the final night of *The Ta'ziyeh of Imam Hussein*, the last of the three to be performed at Lincoln Center. At the end of the evening, the audience stood as a whole and applauded for over ten minutes, many around me with tears in their eyes" (Redden, p. 125).

Ta'zia in India. In India, where many Ḥosayn-related rituals have been part and parcel of Indian folklore for the last 500 years, there is no theatrical representation of Ḥosayn's passion. This is strange when one considers that India is one of the main cradles of world drama. There, ta'zia refers to the interpretive, imaginary representation of Ḥosayn's tomb that is carried in procession. Tradition has it that Timur (1336?-1405) constructed the first ta'zia of Ḥosayn as an expression of devotion and brought it along on military campaigns. Since then, additional creative representations of Ḥosayn's tomb have been built for annual Moḥarram observances around the world. Although in today's age of photography and international travel, artists have the opportunity to view the original tomb at Karbala, they rarely base their creations on the actual burial site. It is thought that the act of artistic creation itself is a form of piety glorifying Ḥosayn and that this creativity supersedes any need to remain true to the original. The size and shape of the ta'zia vary

greatly from small cenotaph-like structures built of *papier-mache*, tinsel, colored paper, and bamboo to huge constructions that must be wheeled or carried by many people. Hindu rituals and festivals have had a great impact on the Moḥarram observances in India. An example of this is the immersion of the ta'zia in water at the end of the Moḥarram ceremony.

Ta'zia in the Caribbean. Among all the cultural relics brought by the East Indians to the Caribbean basin, it is the Moḥarram ritual that has come to eclipse all others. Despite the fact that the great majority of East Indians who migrated to the Caribbean Basin were Hindu rather than Muslim, the Shi'ite Moḥarram ceremonies, which are known in the Caribbean as *Hosay*, became symbols of unity for them. These rituals were often open acts of defiance by the indentured immigrants against colonial rule. Ta'zia continues to this day as a set of rites identifying the East Indians of Trinidad with the homeland of India. This identification stems from the combination of both Hindu and Muslim components. In Trinidad, many of those that build the ta'zia, known locally as *tadjah*, are not Muslims but Hindus or Christians belonging to diverse ethnic groups. African rituals have influenced the Hosay observances in the Caribbean, and, in turn, the Hosay has had an impact on the Carnival, one of the most spectacular events in Trinidad.

Collections of ta'zia texts in original and in translation. The largest collection of ta'zia manuscripts, which comprises 1,055 volumes, is that of Enrico Cerulli, the Italian ambassador to Iran in 1950-54. The manuscripts come from various locations in Iran, and the collection is housed in the Vatican Library. A descriptive catalogue of the collection, entitled *Elenco di drammi religiosi persiani*, was compiled by Ettore Rossi and Alessio Bombaci and published by the Vatican in 1961 (Rossi and Bombaci). The oldest collection of ta'zia texts seems to be that of a German scholar Wilhelm Litten; it dates back to the years 1831-34. This collection of fifteen ta'zias, which were copied for Litten directly from the actors' texts, was published by Friderich Rosen under the title *Das drama in Persia* in 1929. The ta'ziacollection of [Alexander Chodzko](#) (1804-91), a Polish gentleman in the Russian diplomatic service in Persia, is probably as old as that of Litten. It is housed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris and contains thirty-three manuscripts which were copied for Chodzko at the Royal Theatre in Tehran. Two very important collections of ta'zia manuscripts belong to the Malek and Majles Libraries (*Ketābkāna-ye melli-e malek* and *Ketābkāna-ye majles*), both in Tehran.

The most important collection of ta'zia translations is that of Sir Lewis Pelly



(1825-92). This British scholar and diplomat spent eleven years (1862-73) in the south of Persia, translated 37 ta'zia plays into ornate Victorian English, and published them in two volumes in 1879 in London under the title *The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husayn* (Pelly). Some individual ta'zia texts belonging to various collections, not mentioned here, have been critically edited and published, and others have been translated and published in foreign languages (Pettys, 2005; Chelkowski, 1986).

For a music sample, see [Abbās Khāni – Navā](#).

For a music sample, see [Ta'zia of Qazvin](#).

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