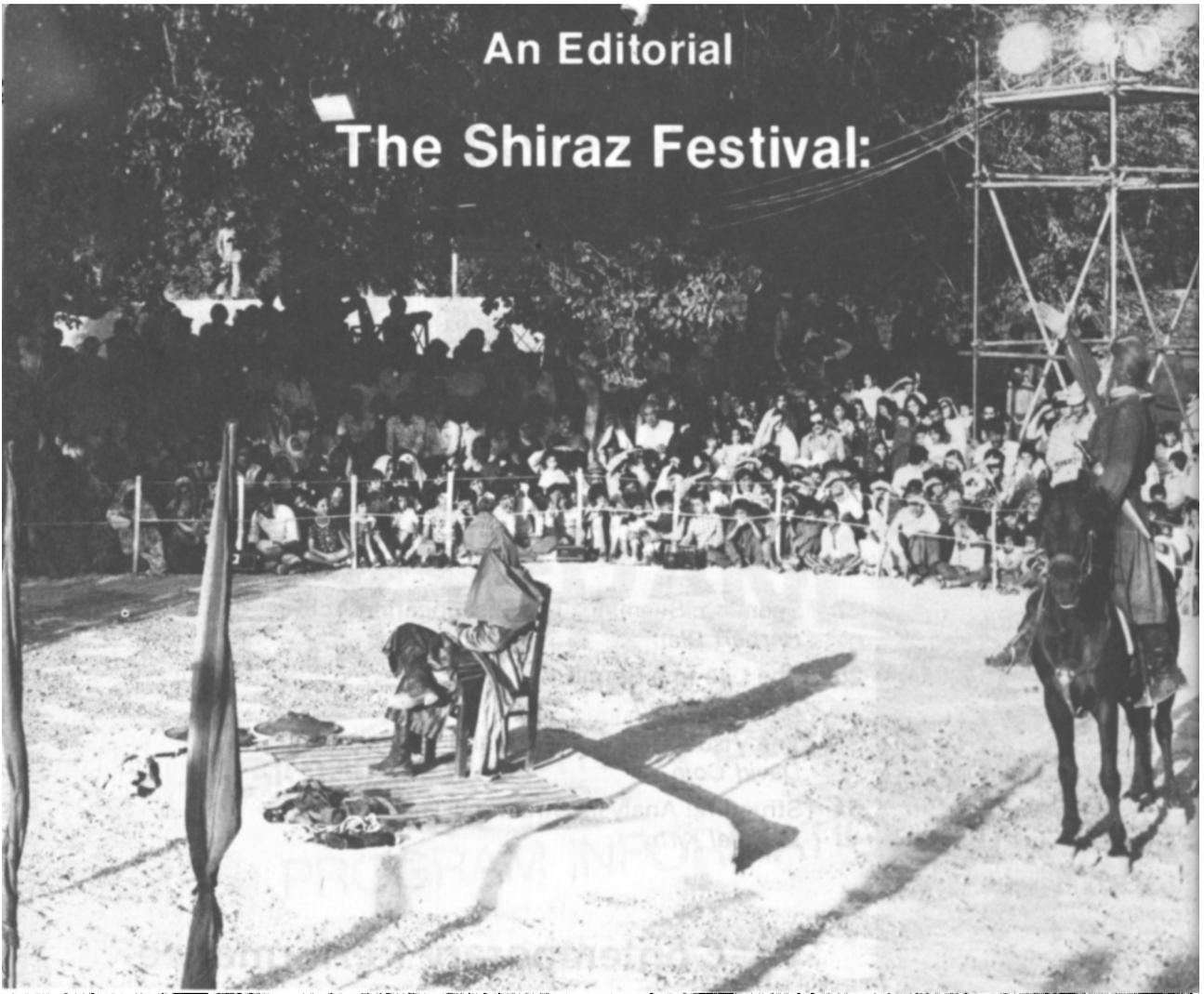


# An Editorial

## The Shiraz Festival:



## Politics and Theatre

For the last nine years, the Festival of Arts Shiraz-Persepolis (known as “the Shiraz festival,” T60) has been one of the leading theatre festivals in the world. Unlike other festivals, it has underwritten many new productions that would not have been possible without its support. Robert Wilson’s *KA MOUNTAIN AND GUARDENIA TERRACE* (T58) and Peter Brook’s *Orghast* were only two of these. In addition to being a gathering place for work that has already been created, the Shiraz Festival has been an important stimulus to creation.

This year there was a boycott of the Festival. Its purpose was to call attention to the torture of political prisoners in Iran. Groups and individuals who had been invited were asked to publically decline attending. If the Festival itself—which, among other things, attempts to be a meeting place for the East and the West—could be curtailed or even forced to suspend its operations that, apparently, would make an even stronger and clearer political point. Only one group from this country, the American Brass Quintet, took part in the Festival. Discussion of the boycott reached the Sunday *New York Times*.

I was invited to the Shiraz Festival and I attended, as other members of the *TDR* staff had in previous years. I did not support the boycott or agree with it. The purpose

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*The title photo is of the Ta'zieh, an indigenous Iranian form.*

of the boycott of Shiraz (and the boycott of the Olympics by the African nations) was political. I do not believe in mixing theatre (or sports) and politics.

Of course, my attendance at the Festival does not mean that I support torture of political prisoners. When I went, I was not even sure that torture was being carried out in Iran. To what extent can we believe what we read and what we hear? I tended to equate these stories with the treatment of criminals in our prisons or the reported murders of Spanish-American suspects by police officers in Texas. Now I think I know. If political prisoners are not being tortured in Iran, it is as if they were. Only good things are written about the Shah and the government. Nobody will discuss politics. One Iranian friend spoke English quite well until I brought up the subject: "What's 'torture'?" he asked. If black and Hispanic prisoners are systematically degraded and mistreated in our prisons, it does not affect the intelligentsia. If journalists and professors are tortured in Iranian prisons, fear is created among the educated class. I sensed the fear. (I also saw many indications of the extensive aid given to the Iranian government by the United States.) I hope that my Iranian friends and other Iranians who happen to read this are not offended when I describe them as fearful. I would act the same way. Fear is not cowardice and is justified in some situations.

Was the Festival itself political? Financially supported by the government, there is no indication that it is promoting or following any party line. Although some attempt is made to promote Iranian artists, the work of these artists has no explicit political message and is not politically dictated or controlled—in the way, for example, that Socialist Realism is prescribed in Russia. This year's Festival brought together presentations from Indonesia, Belgium, Pakistan, Spain, Yugoslavia, Japan, India, and Poland. Artistically, it was a meeting place of nations and cultures.

The most significant work of experimental theatre was Shuji Terayama's *Ship of Fools*, created for the Festival. Before I saw it, I was told on different occasions by two different Festival officials that it was "the same old Terayama" and "merely a series of disconnected images."

Performed outdoors in the old Saraye Moshir Courtyard, *Ship of Fools* did make use of elements and materials familiar to those who knew Terayama's previous work (T55, T56, T60): grotesque costumes and makeup, amplified sound and music (primarily rock), violent movement and imagery, black-dressed stage attendants, darkness and fire. Heavy wooden beams curved up from either side of a large, wooden, rectangular, platform stage like the skeletal ribs of a huge ship. The platform jutted out from one of the walls of the Saraye; the spectators sat on the other three sides, filling the courtyard at every performance.

As I remember it (I did not take notes), the performance began with men digging in a section of the stage that was filled with sand; from another sand-filled section, a man arose. This was probably the judge who, according to the program, "begins a trial about a snail." (A large snail shell was a recurrent image in the performance.) "The defendant is a man who goes to sleep any time and where." Some of the sequences—not necessarily in the order of presentation—were:

Five people sit motionless at a long table. Directly in front of them at some distance are five nearly nude men, standing at attention. A performer moves in front of the table placing a piece of food—a fish, a chicken leg—in front of each of the seated figures. One of them picks up the food and bites into it; the man standing in front of him begins to scream and writhe. He stops when the food is put down. Another seated performer lifts a piece of food and bites into it; the man standing in front of him cries

out and his body is convulsed. The sequence continues until all five people at the table have eaten.

A woman is singing to herself. Someone tries to stop her by putting a hand over her mouth; when the hand is removed, she continues to sing. A white-coated doctor appears and advises an injection. The woman is afraid, but permits the doctor to inject something into the back of her mouth. It does not work. The woman continues to sing. A grotesque figure—perhaps a witch doctor or shaman—performs some sort of ritual over the woman's prostrate body. Still she continues to sing. An almost-nude man stands at the front of the stage. He raises his hands, and a white dove flies away as the lights go out. The woman is still singing.

A woman and a man are dancing some distance from each other. A single strip of white cloth completely wraps each of their heads and stretches between them. As she dances, the woman frees her head. Another man enters with his head wrapped. The woman seizes the end of that bandage, too. Now she is dancing above the men, holding both bands of white that enclose their heads. (At times the stage attendants dressed in black also manipulate the performers like puppets.)

Three people are sitting in chairs looking at a plate full of food at some distance from them on the floor. Finally, one of them runs to the food and, crouching down, attempts to eat it. Attendants immediately appear and drag him away. The other two seated figures do not move. Then one rushes toward the food on all fours. Again the attendants take him away forcefully, as he struggles, growling and biting. The third figure waits. He does not move toward the food. The attendants seize him, too.

These are the images I was told were “disconnected.” (Is that what the festival people wanted us to believe?) Perhaps because the boycott had called my attention to the political situation in Iran, I saw them as political, however. To me *The Ship of Fools* was quite coherent. Terayama seemed to be presenting explicit but non-didactic metaphorical images of totalitarianism. He had performed before in Shiraz. He had created this performance for Shiraz. Without speaking about Iran, he seemed to be speaking about the situation of the Iranian people. If so, nobody appeared to notice.

None of the people I talked to had seen political content. Writing in the *Festival of Arts Bulletin*, Peter Lamborn Wilson complained that Terayama offered “only the same old problems: ugliness, insanity, loss of centre.” Perhaps it was only my imagination.

Terayama held a question-and-answer session that was quite well attended. He began by saying that he would not explain his work because he thought the work spoke for itself. A question was asked about the title of his production. Apparently it had been translated into Farsi as *Ship of the Insane* rather than *Ship of Fools*. (Was this intentional? Insanity is more specific and less easily applied to everyday society.) “Who the fools are is determined by society,” Terayama explained. “What one society considers fools, another society considers normal.” (Metaphorically, the snail shell seemed normal in Iran. At least in political discussion, the people withdrew into their own individual “homes.”) His theatre, he said, was “a way of showing to the world that there is violence.” “The violence in my theatre is like a dust particle compared to the violence in the world.”

In answer to a question, Terayama said that he did not attempt to teach, as did Buddha. “Who can say that we should not live like dogs.” Yet he asked a question: “How can you be comfortable living in a country where people in a film can't even take off their shirts?” He claimed that he had brought ten films to the festival and was only allowed to show five. When a political subject arose, the moderator quickly changed the topic. “We're becoming a ship of-fools,” he said. He thought it was a joke.

I did not ask Terayama about the meaning of his piece. There seemed to be no point in checking with the artist to see if my interpretations were “correct.” I do not

think that he intended *Ship of Fools* to be “read” for a particular message. I am guessing, but I think he was working at a different level—a level at which the content could, so to speak, elude the censor.

According to my hypothesis, Terayama thought that the imagery of his performance would reach the unconscious of its spectators without conscious awareness. For all of the violence of his works, the writer/director is a very compassionate person. It was as if he were offering therapy to those who had to live in a totalitarian state. If they were not able to show their reactions to ruthless social control, these reactions still existed within them. The performance could be seen as providing a catharsis for emotions blocked at an unconscious level.

Is it possible to work directly on the unconscious? I do not know. Iran is also a strongly male chauvinist society; scattered images of male chauvinism occurred throughout *Ship of Fools*. A man, for example, sets fire to the motionless, doll-like figure of a woman. Smoke pours from her dress. Late in the play two women appeared, each with a completely passive man hanging upside-down in front of her, his legs locked behind the woman’s head. Oblivious to the men, the women swept the house and chatted. At this point, an Iranian man near me got up and offered his seat to a woman who, throughout the performance, had been sitting at his feet in the crowd of spectators. I do not think he was aware of the connection between his action and the imagery of Terayama’s performance.

If the other works presented at Shiraz-Persepolis were not didactically political, what could be said, in political terms, of their unconscious content and their intellectual themes? Some, of course, could be seen as refined escapism. Art, as they say, can be an opiate for the masses—or the intelligentsia. Peter Lamborn Wilson wrote “. . . many ‘art-lovers’ are simply beginning to get tired of the fact that the avant-garde never offers them any beauty, any peace of mind.” Other performances might have made one wonder about the distinctions between cathartic medicine, opiate, and anesthetic.

A focus of the festival was the Ta’zieh, an indigenous Iranian form that could be described quickly as a religious folk opera. For years it was prohibited, but now it is being revived. Many Western observers were struck by the intense emotional reaction of the spectators—primarily wailing and breast-beating by the women. (The Ta’zieh performances I attended were presented in an old stable in the hill village of Kaftarak; working people made up a large portion of the audience.) A strain of heroic martyrdom runs through the Ta’zieh, but even when it is not dominant in a particular play—and self-pity and the acceptance of pain are not explicitly demanded—the subject matter is apparently consoling. In *Moses and the Desert Dervish*, a holy man cannot understand why God created Hell as well as Heaven, but he finally accepts its metaphysical correctness.

The contemporary *Miracle in Shargan* from Yugoslavia—a play set in a bar where various people, including a beggar who can miraculously heal people, gather—had a similar theme. It was printed in the program after the synopsis of the play’s action:

*Theme:* the play is meant to show that  
our identity lies within our pain. If  
our pain is removed from us, we lose  
our identity.

The beggar is a false Messiah who realizes  
at last that people should be left alone  
with their own problems.

M. K.